

Long Past Dawn by urdearestmom

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Susan Hargrove

Relationships: Dustin Henderson & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven | Jane Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Eleven | Jane Hopper/Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Lucas Sinclair

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2020-06-24

Updated: 2021-07-19

Packaged: 2022-03-31 10:50:46

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 8

Words: 26,182

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

The paint was a fresh shade of blue, with white trimming, and there were flower boxes in the windows. The porch looked brand new, and the kitchen door was wooden instead of the metal one Max knew she had opened not fifteen minutes ago. There was a clothesline by the side of the house, hung with some dresses, pants, and aprons, flapping in the breeze.

Then she blinked, and the image was gone.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

What up everybody!!!!!! It's been almost a year since I last posted haha idek who's going to read this

In february I reread a book I read as a child and was struck with inspiration for this story. It is based on that book. Since then I have been planning and have plans for about 8 chapters currently but there will be more. Hopefully I can keep a steady update schedule with this fic but I'm not sure how it will work out

Let me know what you thought in the comments below!

Max didn't think much of the house as her mom parked the car in front of it. It was an old farmhouse on the outskirts of a tiny Midwest town. Half the bars of the wraparound porch were rotting and most of the paint was peeling off if not completely gone, revealing first a dusty red and then sky blue under the spotted white, which gave way to aged grey wood.

"Are you excited?" Asked her mom.

Not really, thought Max. "Sure," she replied. "It has potential."

It was a Sunday. Tomorrow she'd be starting at a new school, coming in a month after starting her junior year in the city. Her mom was going to be marrying her boyfriend, Neil, in mid-October, so they'd thought it would be great to all move in together before the wedding as "preparation for living as a family" and luckily moving day landed on a weekend.

Neil himself wasn't so bad, at least not to Max or her mom which was Max's main concern, but his son was a nightmare. Billy was probably just all-around the worst person Max had ever met. He was arrogant, cocky, and mean, and Max just didn't get why he had to be her problem. She'd never wanted a brother.

“Speak of the devil,” she grumbled. Billy had appeared on the porch as soon as she stepped out of the car.

“Welcome home, Max,” he greeted, spreading his arms as if standing in the entrance to some glamorous palace. “Hi, Susan.”

Max’s mom came around the side of the car smiling. “Hello, Billy! Why don’t you help your sister get some boxes into the house? I’ll be right back,” she added, making her way up the steps.

Billy came toward Max without saying anything, so she decided to ignore him and start getting boxes out of the trunk.

“I don’t care what she says,” he said as he reached her. “You’re *not* my sister.”

Their parents were always forcing the idea of the two being siblings onto them, even though clearly neither of them agreed with it. Billy had said this same thing to her dozens of times.

Max rolled her eyes. “You say that like I *want* to be your sister. I don’t like this any more than you do.”

“Good.”

Walking into the house, the porch actually didn’t feel as rickety as it looked, which Max supposed was a good thing. The front door opened into a mudroom sort of area, past which Max could see a room with a fireplace and what was probably the kitchen at the end of the hall. Her mom and Neil were standing in there going over some papers on the counter.

She passed a staircase leading to the upper level halfway down the hall and decided to set her boxes on it for a moment.

“Mom?” She called.

Her mom looked up. “Yes?”

“Which one is my room?”

“Whichever one Billy didn’t put his boxes in,” said Neil. “Ours is the

one right off the stairs.”

On the second floor, there was a room right off the stairs just like Neil had said, with a bedframe in it and a mattress surrounded by boxes. The room in the middle of the hall also had boxes on the floor, as well as a crumpled Coke can and some errant food wrappers. That left the room at the end of the hall, over the kitchen and facing the back of the property.

Stepping into it, Max was impressed by the amount of sunlight let in by the windows. The ceiling was slanted but fairly high above her, which was a change from her room in the old house. She set her boxes on the floor and went to take a look outside.

From her window she could see all the way down to the edge of the property, which was a bit of a distance. Clearly the people who'd originally lived here had been farmers, judging by the fields in the distance. She wondered if the fields still came with the house, or if they were owned by someone else now.

There was a creek bubbling along where the grass met the trees on the border fence with the neighbours, and Max liked that although the front of the property was entirely wooded save for the driveway and a bit of space around the house, the back had quite a bit of empty grass. There were of course bushes and trees, and she could see some kind of structure near the creek that looked like it might be a storage shed or a small cabin. It looked interesting, so she decided she would go take a look once she had all her boxes up in her room.

Close up, the shed really did look like a little house. It even had a chimney. *Who knows*, Max thought, *maybe it was a house*. The door gave way with a little push, and she found the inside was just big enough to have been a sleeping space for a few people, with a bit more room on the side where the chimney was. Her first impression was that it was dusty, and it looked like some animals had made a home of it in one corner. Probably raccoons. There were also some gardening implements scattered around the room, so it likely had been used as a shed too.

The grass grew tall around the walls, and the bushes almost obscured

the double doors in the ground. Max would have tumbled over them and straight into the creek if she hadn't seen the rusty latch sticking up. She was confused for a second but then she realized it must be a root cellar. She remembered hearing about them in third grade social studies when they learned about pioneers. It looked like it was just as old as the house, and for a second Max wondered how old the house actually was.

When she lifted the latch and pulled the doors open, the strong smell of dirt hit her nose. There were steps leading into the darkness, dug directly out of the soil, with rotting planks still covering some. For some reason, this root cellar seemed to be pulling Max into it. She couldn't fathom why, but something was telling her that it was important.

Of course, there was nothing in there. There was some wood on the ground that had probably been shelves at some point, but other than that it appeared as though the root cellar hadn't been in use for a very long time. Max was disappointed to find that it was nothing but a musty hole in the ground.

As she turned back toward the house, the creek behind Max seemed to get louder for a moment, and when it did, something strange happened. The old, peeling, desolate-looking farmhouse didn't look anything like it had a second before. It was almost like a superimposed image, except Max was looking at it with her own eyes.

The paint was a fresh shade of blue, with white trimming, and there were flower boxes in the windows. The porch looked brand new, and the kitchen door was wooden instead of the metal one Max knew she had opened not fifteen minutes ago. There was a clothesline by the side of the house, hung with some dresses, pants, and aprons, flapping in the breeze.

Then she blinked, and the image was gone. The old house was back, and there was no breeze. It was actually the hottest day of September so far and the air felt stagnant. Max wondered if maybe the heat was getting to her and giving her hallucinations.

Inside the kitchen it was a bit cooler, but Max still stopped to have a

glass of water and clear her head before heading back up to her room. While she was outside, the men had brought in her bedframe and mattress from the moving truck that had arrived earlier, so she got around to building it back up.

Her mom called her down for lunch right after she'd finished making her bed. She was sitting at the table in front of a plate of sandwiches, pouring herself a drink from the lemonade pitcher. Billy had apparently decided to eat outside, as was obvious by his shadow in the window, and Neil was nowhere to be found.

Max sat down and helped herself to a sandwich.

"So how are you liking the house so far, Max?"

Max swallowed. "It's fine, I guess," she said, shrugging. "I like the back. Did you see that little shed thing down there?"

Her mom nodded. "We saw it when we checked out the property but I haven't really thought about it much."

Max didn't say anything for a moment, but then she remembered the vision she'd seen. "Mom, do you have any idea how old this place is?"

"I don't remember exactly, but it's in the papers somewhere. I know it's at least a hundred years old," she offered. "We have a chain of title that shows all the owners of the property since- oh, I don't know, 1840-something."

"That's cool."

Ms. Mayfield furrowed her brows. "Why are you asking? I never thought history was something you were interested in."

Max leaned back, chewing. "No reason. It just looks so old I wondered."

After that, her mom let it go. Max spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking all her stuff from the boxes, hanging what needed to be hung in her closet and leaving the rest of her clothes stacked in piles on the floor along with some books and other stuff she hadn't thrown

out before moving. She built her desk and set it up in the corner near the window so she'd get a lot of light, but her dresser would have to wait until tomorrow.

It was early evening when she found herself sitting at the desk watching the sunset. Her bedroom windows faced west, giving her a wonderful view. The temperature was finally dipping to a more acceptable September level as the sun fell below the horizon, and Max wondered what Dustin would have thought of this place.

It was the first time all day that she had thought about him, surprising herself. A huge part of her not wanting to leave her hometown was that that had been the place where she had known him and grown up with him, and also the place where he had departed. He had been an enormous part of her life and that city was her main connection to him.

Her mom had thought it would be good for her to get away from that place and give herself time to heal, but Max wasn't sure she agreed. It had been almost a year and she was still struggling to cope with the loss. It was hard not to blame herself even when everyone else told her it wasn't her fault.

Looking out on the wooded landscape with its green trees and grass and bushes and the little creek running through, Max decided Dustin would have loved her new house. It looked just like the set of every one of his adventure stories. She was thinking about how exactly he would explain that shed and root cellar and her very weird vision of the pretty house when she noticed movement outside.

Someone was walking around by the shed. At first Max thought it was her mom because it clearly wasn't a man, but she quickly scrapped that idea because the woman was a brunette with a long braid down her back. Max's mom had bright red hair just like her, and she didn't own any ankle length dresses either.

It looked like the woman was carrying a bucket of something- maybe milk?- and headed in the direction of the cellar. Max only looked away for a second as she got up to look closer, but when she looked back, the woman was gone. Vanished straight into thin air with no trace of her.

“What the hell?” Murmured Max. Something very strange was definitely going on at this place. The longer she thought about it, the more she realized... maybe the woman was a ghost. The dress she’d been wearing looked old-fashioned, like Anne of Green Gables old-fashioned, and that was in line with the age of the house.

Seeing ghosts was the last thing she needed. Max already had too many nightmares about death.

At dinner she decided to bring it up, but nobody seemed to believe her. None of them had seen anyone either. Billy went so far as to call her stupid and ask what kind of drugs she was on, to which her mother didn’t react. Neil only clenched his jaw, but it was enough to shut Billy up. She could hear them yelling outside as she made her way to the bathroom between hers and Billy’s bedrooms to shower before bed.

Later, Max was sitting on her bed braiding her wet hair, looking into the darkness outside. It had been a long day to say the least. But something outside kept calling her. She needed to find out more. The most she could do tonight was at least go investigate the scene of the sighting, right?

There was no deliberation. She threw on the closest sweater and snatched a flashlight out of what was quickly becoming the junk drawer in the kitchen on her way out the back door. The darkness of the yard was only lightly illuminated by the moon, but Max’s flashlight beam cut through easily.

As she drew closer to the shed and the cellar, she wasn’t sure whether she was supposed to feel scared. If she *had* seen a ghost, who was to say it wasn’t malevolent? What if it was waiting for her? Maybe she’d been the only one to see it because it had wanted her to be the only one. But at the same time, nothing about the woman had seemed creepy or threatening other than her being a stranger... and nothing had seemed scary about Max’s vision of the house, either, which she was sure was related.

Soon enough, the flashlight beam hit the side of the shed. Max walked all around it and found no signs of anyone being there. She checked inside and found it empty. The bucket the woman had been

carrying wasn't anywhere. The doors to the root cellar were closed with the latch, which they wouldn't be if someone was inside, so that was another possibility eliminated.

Max was starting to doubt herself. Maybe she'd imagined all of it. It certainly seemed like it, and it was the only thing that made sense. She didn't put much stock in her ghost theory.

"Okay," she said to herself as she marched back to the house. "I have school tomorrow and I need to sleep. Stop thinking about ghosts."

But she struggled to fall asleep that night, her mind racing with possible explanations for what she'd seen. She knew she wasn't crazy. Something had to be off about this place, and Max was going to find out.

2. Chapter 2

Monday morning came bright and early. Since Max lived on the edge of town and the high school was in the central area, she had a long ride ahead of her and had to get up before everyone else. It was barely dawn when her alarm clock went off.

Before she left, she grabbed some food out of the fridge and dumped it haphazardly into her backpack. She didn't have many books taking up space yet. Her skateboard sat on the porch until she picked it up and started walking toward the road.

The one good thing about it being so early was that there was no one else on the roads, at least not out where she lived. She guessed that meant the neighbours probably didn't have any school aged kids. Or maybe they did and they just got driven to school. Who knew. Max wasn't overly concerned with other people's lives.

It was nice to feel the sunrise on her face as she headed east into town. Driving through the day before, she hadn't really paid much attention to it, but skating through was slower. The fields around her house gave way to residential streets with houses that all looked like the picture-perfect suburban home for the all-American family. In itself it wasn't a bad ideal, but Max liked houses with a little more character.

Those streets eventually led into the centre of town, where Max skated past the police station with two cruisers sitting out front, and the post office where the mailman was getting ready for his morning run. Main Street was lined with shops, but she remembered from the map her mom had given her last night that all three schools were on the next street, with the elementary and middle schools across from the high school.

It was nearing time for first period, so the parking lot was filling up. Max skated right up to the doors and walked in, her board under one arm. The secretary in the main office gave her her schedule and her locker information, then sent her off.

Her locker was on the other side of the building, so she walked

through halls full of students. Nobody particularly stood out to her as looking like they were staring at her, so she minded her business. It was nice to go unnoticed at school for once. Like things had been before last year.

Her first period was Algebra II, followed by PE and then lunch. She went and sat outside for lunch, enjoying the nice weather while it lasted. Midwestern winters always hit hard and fast. Third period was American History, where her teacher announced that their class was now going to begin a semester-long project on a topic of the student's choosing, but that it would be done in partners that had already been picked. Max was paired with a boy from the front of the classroom named Lucas.

Lucas sat in the desk next to Max as the class rearranged itself and introduced himself.

"You're new here, right? I don't think I've seen you before," he said.

Max nodded. "I moved yesterday."

He looked surprised. "You moved yesterday and you're already at school?"

She shrugged. "My mom said I was lucky moving day was on a weekend so I wouldn't have to miss school. It's fine."

Lucas shrugged. "Okay, so do you have any ideas for what you want to do on this project?"

Max didn't have any. It was her first day in class. But Lucas didn't seem to mind her silence, rambling on about his thoughts and possible things they could do for their project. Max thought it was kind of cute, the way he seemed so passionate about the topic. Eventually their teacher called them all back to their regular seats and started the actual lecture, sending Lucas back to the front.

At the end of class, the teacher called her over.

"I just wanted to welcome you to my class," he told her. "I hope you don't have any problems with Lucas, he's an exemplary student and I thought he could help you ease into the semester here."

Max picked at her jeans awkwardly. "He's fine, thank you."

Mr. Beemer smiled. "Well, that's settled then. Please let me know if there's anything you need help with, alright?"

Max said that she would and headed off to English. The end of the school day rolled around fairly quickly, and she found she didn't hate the block scheduling this school had like she thought she would. She'd been used to having six periods since middle school, but it wasn't a bad change.

She was skating home, already out past the cookie cutter houses and into the fields, when she noticed someone ahead of her. Someone familiar.

"Lucas?"

He looked back and slowed his pedalling when he realized it was her, letting her catch up to him.

"Hey," he greeted. "You live out here?"

Lucas was going slower than before but Max still had to push off hard to keep up evenly. "Yeah," she answered quickly. "Just up the road. Old white farmhouse."

He pondered her statement for a moment. "The one you can barely see from the street?"

"How many are there?"

Lucas laughed. "You're right. Out here it's pretty much just us. I had no idea people were moving in, though."

Max didn't say anything else, so Lucas took it upon himself to continue the conversation. "Well, I live next door, other side of the woods by the creek. It's more like two blocks distance if we were in town."

"Do you live in an old ass house too?"

He shook his head. "There used to be one, apparently, but the

previous owners tore it down and built a new one. That's what my parents bought."

Max thought for a second. Maybe Lucas would know something about the strange occurrences yesterday.

"Do you know anything about this area? These houses?" She asked.

Lucas looked at her questioningly. "Why? Did you see something?"

He knew immediately what she was getting at. Either he was psychic or Max wasn't the only person who'd had those experiences before.

"If you mean creepy stuff like ghosts... I've never seen anything," he continued. "But nobody's ever lived in your house for very long. I've heard rumours about weird stuff happening, people seeing ghosts. I like to think that I'm a man of science, so I don't really believe there isn't another explanation, but the fact stands that nobody stays for long."

He only added to Max's ghost theory. She'd really hoped there might be another way to explain what happened, but if other people had seen similar things... The image of the woman she saw in the yard yesterday came to her again, startlingly clear.

Max didn't have anything much else to say to him, but she thanked Lucas for being kind to her and said she would see him again tomorrow when they got to the dirt driveway that led to her house. Her mom and Neil had said they would be out buying furniture and other stuff for most of the afternoon, so she wasn't expecting them home, and Billy was supposed to be job hunting. There were no cars out front, confirming an empty house.

She grabbed some fruit from the kitchen and ascended the stairs to her room. After eating, Max decided to put together her dresser so she could get the rest of her clothes off the floor. She didn't want to dive straight into homework, and all she needed to do was put the drawers back into place anyway. While she did that, she thought about how her school day would have gone if Dustin had been with her.

He would've loved Algebra but made fun of the teacher (Mr. Ermet, pronounced er-may, looked like a mole rat with glasses in a tweed suit). PE had been the site of all of Dustin's worst school moments, so he hated the class with a passion. Max thought he would've liked Mr. Beemer, and she was fairly sure he would have gotten along really well with Lucas too. English had been a favourite subject as well, and the teacher for that class was pretty nice.

She blinked back tears. In all, it would've been a normal day at school with her best friend. It wasn't a hard day, but it would've been a little easier if he'd been there to share it with her. She missed him too much to put into words.

Sometimes Max wondered why she never felt this way about her dad, who'd died before she'd had the chance to remember him. Maybe she should feel worse, *because* she'd been robbed of knowing her father, but she didn't because there wasn't anything to miss. It's hard to reminisce when you never actually knew the person. It's very different when it's your best friend who you've grown up with that dies right in front of you.

To get away from her depressive thoughts, Max focused on her homework. Algebra was fairly easy, just a few problem sets her teacher had assigned her to get a feel for where she was at, and English was just to read a handout and answer some analysis questions. History hadn't gotten any homework, but she was still stumped on what to do for her project with Lucas. He'd presented some good ideas, but none of them really stuck out to her.

Eventually, she ended up falling asleep at the desk with her head on her arms, the sunlight warming her face.

She was driving. It was a blank stretch of road through the forest just outside the city. Her mom had taken her practice driving there a thousand times. Max knew where she was going and exactly what was going to happen. It was almost like she was sitting in a movie theater watching it all unfold, except she was in the driver's seat. She'd had this dream countless times before.

Dustin was gesticulating wildly in the passenger seat beside her,

telling her all about how he'd built a radio whose signal reached all the way to Utah and that he'd talked to a girl from Salt Lake City named Suzie. He was super excited to tell his mentor, their middle school science teacher. Unfortunately, in all his excitement, Dustin had forgotten to fasten his seatbelt.

At the time, Max hadn't noticed, and if she had she probably wouldn't have mentioned it anyway, but every time she had this dream she wanted to scream at him to put it on and never forget again because it was going to save his life.

But she was excited to be driving without her mom. It was still a new feeling, having all this freedom, and Max was fully enjoying it. Suddenly, her headlights cut across a deer in the middle of the dark road and she swerved to avoid it, sending the car straight into the trees. All she could hear was her own blood-curdling scream.

They crashed into a tree almost immediately, the front crumpling like a tin can. Max's seat belt held her down but her head ricocheted against the seat so hard she blacked out for a few seconds. She looked to her right expecting to see Dustin there, even though she already knew he wasn't.

It was always at this part of the dream that Max tried to wake herself up. Sometimes it worked, other times she would make so much noise that she woke up her mom. Sometimes-

"Wake up!"

Sometimes it was Billy. He was standing over her with an angry expression, fists clenched.

"What are you crying about, you stupid bitch? Can't a guy get some peace around here?" He yelled.

Max stood up and pushed him away from her. "Get out, Billy!"

His hand whipped forward and gripped her wrist hard as he leaned in close to her face. "Don't you dare push me like that again," he seethed.

"Let- go of me!" She ripped her arm out of his hand and ran past him

down the hall to the stairs. She didn't know where she was going, she just knew she needed to get away from Billy before he seriously hurt her. He'd never done anything like that before but Max was sure he could and she didn't want to find out what he was capable of.

Her feet led her out into the yard and she ended up at the doors to the root cellar. Billy likely wouldn't come looking for her out there. One of the many trees around back of the shed cast its shadow over the cellar doors, one side completely dark and the other bathed in sunlight. Max yanked the latch up and dove into the dirt room without a second thought.

As the door closed over her head, she was encased completely in darkness and got turned around for a moment, but she quickly found the back wall and leaned against it. She decided to wait for some time before going outside again, to give Billy time to calm down.

Soon, too soon, she heard footsteps in the grass. Billy must have realized where she went after all. Max steeled herself.

When the doors opened above her, she didn't see Billy. In fact, what she did see confused her to no end.

There were shelves on the walls full of jars and crates of vegetables arranged on the floor. There was even a bucket of milk in one corner. Most confusing of all, the person entering the root cellar was the same person she had seen outside in the yard the day before, even wearing the same dress.

The woman- no, girl, Max could see that now as she approached. The girl didn't look like she was more than Max's own sixteen. She stopped as she reached the bottom and saw Max.

"My word," she said. "Who are you?"

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everybody! Thank you to those who left me lovely comments on the first chapter <3 I hope you enjoyed this second one and let me know what you thought of it! What do you think is going on and who

is this mysterious girl...?

3. Chapter 3

Max didn't know how to react. The person in front of her was definitely solid and real; nothing ghostly about her.

The girl crossed her arms. "Well? What's your name? You'd better tell me quick, the missus doesn't take kindly to strangers in her cellar."

Max swallowed. "My name is Max."

"Is it short for Maxine? I've never met a girl named Max before," said the girl. "In fact I've never seen a girl in britches before either! What sort of clothes are those?"

Something had to be very wrong here. In what world were Max's clothes weird? She was wearing a t-shirt and jeans like she almost always did. She would've said this girl's clothes were weird, clearly last century fashion.

"I could ask you the same," Max replied. "I've never seen someone dressed like you either, except in movies."

"What's a movie?"

Okay, something was *definitely* wrong. Max decided not to say anything else on it.

The girl observed her for a moment longer before picking a jar off the shelf closest to her and turning back up the steps, which Max now noticed were brand new and not rotted like she knew them.

"Are you lost? I suppose I might be able to help you, I'm about to have my lunch," said the girl. "I can give you some food."

Max wasn't really hungry, but she agreed and followed the girl out of the cellar and into the yard. Upon reaching the top, she realized several things: it had been early evening when she ran away from Billy and now it was high noon, the shed beside the root cellar was completely gone, and the house looked just like how it had in the strange mirage she'd seen yesterday.

“Alright,” said the girl. “You stay put right here and I’ll be back with some lunch.”

Max thought it was a reasonable plan of action. She didn’t see any other people nearby, but no doubt “the missus” was in the house. Looking around, everything seemed brighter somehow, and Max realized it was because none of the trees were losing leaves like they had already started to the week before. It looked like springtime, with flowers and other plants blooming all over. But that didn’t make sense. How could it be springtime when it was fall? And how it could be the middle of the day when it had been evening the last time Max was outside?

She could only come up with one logical conclusion that tied all of it together, but it didn’t seem real. Had she time travelled through the root cellar? She didn’t want to think of what it could mean. Would she even be able to get home? Then again, maybe that wasn’t so bad. Home wasn’t the greatest place.

In a few minutes, the girl was coming back. She was holding something wrapped in cloth and her long brown braid swished behind her in the breeze. She looked displeased and was grumbling to herself.

As she reached Max, she smiled kindly and handed her the cloth. “Hold this for a moment, would you?”

Max watched as she walked back in the direction of the house and around the side, then heard her voice as it carried across the yard.

“Michael Wheeler, you get down off that roof before your mother sees you!”

Max was sure that Michael’s mother had already heard the commotion, but in a few seconds the girl was coming back around the house towards her, accompanied by a dark-haired boy. He was dressed similarly in an old-fashioned style, in a white buttoned shirt tucked into pants held up by suspenders, only he was barefoot. Max guessed he probably lived here and didn’t care to wear shoes while at home.

But I live here , she thought. *What?*

“This is Max,” said the girl as they approached. “I found her in the cellar.”

Max waved awkwardly. “Hello.”

Michael looked her over. “I’m Michael. Most call me Mike. What are you wearing britches for?”

Max bristled. “Who wears suspenders anymore?” Something about his tone irked her, even though he hadn’t been rude. Her jeans seemed to be a source of confusion for the two in front of her.

His eyebrows scrunched together for a moment but he only shrugged. “I just never saw a girl wear them before. Come to think of it, I never saw any like yours either.”

The girl reached out for the cloth Max was holding. “Let’s go sit by the water,” she offered. They led the way as Max followed, and the three of them ended up under a shady tree by the creek’s edge.

“Wait, you didn’t tell me your name,” said Max, turning towards the girl.

She seemed to be embarrassed. “Sorry,” she said softly. “Sometimes I forget. My name is Eleanora, but you can call me El or Nora.”

“The *priest* calls you Nora,” snorted Mike. “It makes you sound like an elderly lady. El is much more fresh, in my opinion.”

Eleanora glared at him. “I am an adult, *Michael*. ”

“You’re seventeen.”

She continued to stare pointedly at him until he relented.

“Fine, Miss adult. Say what you want. I don’t think myself an adult yet and I’m older than you, but to each his own,” he said.

“Thank you,” said El primly, unwrapping her cloth to reveal a sizable chunk of bread and a thick slice of cheese.

Max looked between them. She couldn't be one hundred percent sure, but she was nearly certain that there was something going on with them. Maybe not at the moment, but she thought she could sense a tension between the two that indicated... something.

Mike didn't say anything else as he leaned back against the tree, so El initiated the conversation.

"So where do you come from? Must be a mighty strange place if they let you go around without a skirt," she remarked, handing Max a piece of the cheese. "Why were you hiding in the cellar anyway?"

Max stared at the ground, unsure whether to share her theory or if they would think she was crazy.

"I'm from here," she finally said. "But not from... *here*. I have an idea but you're going to think I'm insane."

The two of them looked at her curiously, as if they didn't believe that any explanation she could give would be baffling to such an extent.

"Share it anyway," said Mike. "We aren't going to hurt you."

She took a deep breath and prepared herself. "What's the date?"

El blinked at her in confusion. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"It'll confirm my theory."

"It's May... twenty-ninth, I believe," offered Mike.

"And the year?" Asked Max, her trepidation building.

"1863," he answered.

"Right," she said. "So, I live in that house. My family just moved in two days ago," she explained. "But last I checked, it was September 1987."

Neither Mike nor El said anything for a few moments, El just ripping off chunks of bread and eating them nervously, until Mike

interrupted their silence.

“That’s impossible,” he said incredulously. “How could you be from over a century into the future?”

Max shrugged and pulled her knees up to her chest. “I don’t know. I was hiding from my stepbrother in the cellar, and next thing I knew, El was coming in and everything looked completely different.”

There was silence again.

“Look, I know I sound crazy, but you have to believe me,” pleaded Max. “I don’t know what’s going on either. This isn’t my home.”

El looked up from her bread. “That would explain your strange clothes,” she said. “Women don’t wear dresses in the future?”

“In my time, people wear whatever they want,” Max answered. “Lots of women still wear dresses and skirts, I just prefer pants.”

El shrugged as if that satisfied her and continued to eat.

“There has to be another explanation,” asserted Mike. “Time travel doesn’t exist.”

Max was starting to be annoyed by him. What other explanation could there be?

“I don’t know what else to say,” she replied. “I can’t convince you.”

El and Mike looked at each other, almost as though having a conversation, before El kneeled and shook out her apron.

“I have to get back to work,” she said. “But Mike will take you to town. Maybe you can find help there.”

Max got the feeling Mike didn’t like the idea, but she was grateful they hadn’t run screaming the second they saw her.

She waited by the wall of the house, out of sight of the windows, watching as El went back inside and Mike disappeared around the corner of the porch to find his boots. Max wasn’t sure what was going

to come of this trip into town, as she didn't think it would be useful if she really was where she thought she was. If it truly was 1863, going to town would only prove it and would be no help getting back.

But maybe... maybe this was all some hugely elaborate prank and going to town would reveal it. It seemed like a stretch, but then again so did the idea that time travel was real.

"Let's be on our way," said Mike as he approached. "Town is at least an hour's walk."

"An *hour*?" Asked Max. "Isn't there a faster way?"

He looked her over. "What, like a horse? We only have one and my mother would notice right away if I took her out."

Max stood still for a second and Mike grumbled something else under his breath as he walked in the direction of the road.

"What did you say?" She asked as she caught up to him.

He glanced at her quickly and his gaze slid to the house behind them, then back to their destination. "I said my ma isn't likely to take any explanation. She's a busybody. Knows everyone's business. She'd know you're a stranger."

As they emerged from the treeline, Max was shocked to find that the road was no longer paved (although in the back of her mind, was she really?). It was made of dirt and dust rose where Mike stepped onto it.

"Sounds like my mom," she said acidly. "At least before we moved here."

"You don't get along with your ma?"

"You don't get along with yours?"

They looked at each other at the same moment, and Max saw the hint of a smile in his face.

The dirt road stretched out in front of them endlessly, but Max

noticed that the area wasn't much different. It was all trees and road, interspersed with fields, the same as she had seen on her way to school. That was a comfort, at least. Fifteen minutes had gone by in silence before Mike spoke again.

"She's not so bad," he said. "My ma," he added, upon registering Max's confused expression. "She just cares too much about other people. Family reputation, and the like."

Max hummed in assent. Her mom wasn't dissimilar. "Mine was like that too, before we moved. She knew everyone in our neighbourhood. I think she'll just need some time here before she's back to it."

"Where did you live, before?"

"California."

Mike whistled. "That's far west, isn't it? How long did it take you to get all the way here?"

"Well, I didn't move from there," said Max. She didn't know what had made her say it, she barely remembered moving from California at all. "I lived there a long time ago. Before I came here I lived in Indianapolis."

"You know the city well, then?"

She supposed she did. She had spent most of her life living in it, after all.

The pair went on in silence. Max struggled to think of things to say. She didn't really like walking alone in such a deserted place with a boy she didn't know and didn't trust. He likely didn't trust her either. Luckily he didn't seem anything like Billy, or like the type of boys Max strived to avoid at school.

"Tell me," he said after a while, "If you really are from the future, who wins the war?"

She stumbled over a tree root. "What war?"

Mike stared at her. "The one that has those Confederates thinking they're a different country than the rest of us."

Right. The Civil War was happening at this time. Had been for a few years, if Max's history classes had taught her anything.

"The Union does," she replied. "Not for a few years I think, but they will eventually."

"And the slaves? Will it be better for them?"

Max was surprised by this line of questioning. For a man of this time, she wouldn't have expected it.

"Not really," she answered. "Slavery gets abolished but black people essentially have no rights for about another hundred years. And even then, in my time, it could be a lot better than it is. Why?"

It reminded her of her possible new friend Lucas for a second, and she wondered if his ancestors were among those imprisoned on southern plantations. It was a terrible thought, but it made the concept she'd barely been taught about in school horribly real. Lucas was a person that she knew, and to think of what generations upon generations of his family had been forced to experience at the hands of people who looked like her made her feel sick.

"Well, because I think it's unconstitutional and disgusting," said Mike, and that was the second time he surprised Max in a matter of a minute. Who would've thought that someone brought up in 1850s Indiana would know what 'unconstitutional' meant?

It seemed he could see her surprise reflected in her expression because he continued. "I went to school in town for a few years, until I got to be old enough and times were hard enough that I was needed on the farm. But I never stopped learning. One of our neighbours has a large collection of books and lets me read 'em sometimes."

Max wasn't sure how to reply with anything but 'that's nice', which she was going to say, but Mike had at last found something worthwhile to talk about.

"Did you go to school, living in the city and all?" He asked curiously.

She nodded. "I was at school today, before I came here."

He paused as if considering her words. "Here, to the past?"

She nodded again, hoping that he was starting to believe her even though she wasn't quite sure that she believed herself.

"So you really do believe you come from the future, then?"

Max wanted to make a noise; say something, but her stomach was twisted into a knot so tight she felt like she couldn't breathe. What if this was real and she couldn't go back? Home wasn't great, but the idea of being *stuck* in a time unrecognizable to her was even worse. Why was she here in the first place? Was she meant to change something?

"I don't know what I believe," she said weakly. "None of this makes any sense. All I'm hoping for is that when we get to town I'll see this is all some elaborate prank, 'cause there's no way someone changed the whole town to fit this."

Mike seemed to agree although he didn't respond. With every step forward she took, Max felt an impending sense of doom and wanted to run away back to the house, but she knew she needed to press on. In order to distract herself, she asked her companion something that had been at the back of her mind since meeting him and El.

"What's going on with you and El?"

He seemed startled by the question. "What do you mean?"

The pinkness coming into his face gave Max some amusement; it was also a signal that this was a topic of embarrassment for him.

"Are you, you know...?"

"Courting? No, we are not," he replied shortly.

"But you wish you were," Max teased lightly.

Mike looked away. "I don't wish for anything she wouldn't want. She's very important to me."

“How do you know her?”

He picked at the edge of a suspender nervously. “Her parents died in a fire when she was a child, so her aunt raised her,” he said. “I knew her then because we both went to school. But her aunt died a few years back and she had nowhere else to go, so my mother took her on as a hired girl. She works for my family.”

“And you like her.”

“I suppose I do. And you? Got a fella at home?”

Max’s mind jumped to Lucas for a second, but then she shook her head. “I don’t know anyone yet.”

Mike looked like he was going to say something else, but his eyes narrowed as he looked into the distance.

He held a hand to his forehead to block the sun and squinted a bit. “There’s the gristmill,” he said. “We’ll be in town soon.”

Sure enough, within minutes Max could see the outline of buildings appearing down the road, and the sense of foreboding rushed back full force. Nothing was familiar. Where were the cookie cutters she’d passed on her way to and from school?

The edge of the town gave her her answer. Those houses were over 100 years into the future. All the buildings around her were built out of clapboard except what Max recognized as the town hall, which stood in the same spot on Main Street and was built of stone.

She froze in place, shock coursing through her. Here was her proof: it really *was* 1863. That meant that everything she knew was 124 years ahead of her. Every person she’d ever met, every place she’d been, didn’t exist yet as she knew it. Her own birth wouldn’t even happen until 1971.

She was adrift in time, with no idea how to get back.

Max had sat down hard on the grass at the side of the dirt road, staring. Mike had kept walking for a few moments, until he realized

she wasn't with him and turned back around.

"Are you alright?" He'd asked.

No, she was very much not alright. Nothing about this situation was good, and Max didn't know what she should do about it.

He sat down beside her and didn't say anything for a while. Max was glad for the silence, as it made it easier for her to try and sort her racing thoughts.

This was real. How would she go home? Could it even be done? She was hit with a pang of hopelessness and terror, and all of a sudden she realized that she wanted her mother. There was a part of Max's brain that said an adult would know what to do, even though the rest of it told her her mother would be just as at a loss as she was.

"Max?" Came a voice from beside her. Who was that again?

"Do you want some water?" A hand followed the voice, holding a flask out to her.

Max took it gratefully and drank, the fresh water clearing her mind for a moment.

"I think I need to go back," she said. "The root cellar."

She saw Mike nod from the corner of her eye. "I promise I'll help you however I can." He paused. "But since I'm here, I should get a few things for my mother."

Max waited for him to say something else, but he didn't. "Okay. I'll stay here."

"Go further away so nobody sees you," advised Mike. "The bushes will hide you. I shouldn't be long."

He went into the town and returned a scant twenty minutes later with a paper bag and a bolt of a plaid brown fabric tucked under his arm. On the way back, Max didn't feel much like making conversation anymore, but he told her all about the contents of the bag anyway. Apparently he'd got his mother some buttons of several

sizes, and he embarrassedly told Max that the blue ribbon was a new bonnet ribbon he was going to give to El to match her Sunday dress. It made Max smile.

Neither of them said much else, but somehow the walk back to the farm seemed to go quicker than the walk to town had and they could soon see the path that led from the road to the front of the house.

As soon as she caught sight of the house through the trees, Max broke into a run. She needed to get to the root cellar. The afternoon sun beat down harshly, making Max's sweaty hair stick to her face. She heard Mike call out to her and start after her, but the items he carried bogged him down and he didn't catch up. Luckily for Max, there was no one in the yard and she went straight for the doors of the cellar.

It was dark and cool inside, just as it had been earlier, and Max leaned against the wall to catch her breath. Nothing outside sounded like it had changed, but she couldn't tell yet in the pitch black underground.

After a few moments, she decided to go back outside. If it hadn't worked, she wasn't sure what she would do, but to her relief she felt the bottom step give a little under her foot as she stepped onto it. It was plain packed dirt; the wood was gone. As she pushed open the doors, the orange light of sunset lit the dark, and Max saw what she'd seen originally: an empty hole in the ground.

4. Chapter 4

Summary for the Chapter:

Max does some exploring.

Notes for the Chapter:

hey everyone! i have no idea if anyone will still be reading this cuz it's been like a solid 3 months since i last updated...

unfortunately a family member of mine passed away over the summer so it was a bit of an adjustment. i've also been busy with work and other activities, and i've gone back to school after a year's break so i've had quite a bit of stuff to get used to managing.

on the flip side, i do have most of this story planned out already so it's just a matter of finding time to write. that being said, i do need to focus on school so i don't know how frequently i'll update. i guess we'll have to see!

thank you so much to anyone who is still reading and let me know what you thought!

When Max came out of the cellar, the sun was still setting. Everything looked the same as it had the moment she'd gone in. How could it be possible? She'd been gone for at least a few hours. Her mom probably wasn't even home yet. Had she imagined it all? She didn't remember hitting her head anywhere.

She climbed out slowly and made her way toward the house, which was old and peeling again. An eerie feeling settled over her. Now that she'd seen the house differently, it looked like it was dead; a shell of its former glory. It was a ghost house.

The clock on the kitchen wall indicated that it was 7:27, so essentially no time at all had passed in the present. Max could even

hear Billy blasting music from his room, proving that she was back home in 1987.

“What the hell,” she whispered to herself. Wherever she’d been the last few hours had felt so real, and looking down at her shoes Max saw that it had been. They were covered in dust from the road.

She needed to find out more. Hadn’t her mom said there was some kind of document showing previous owners of the property? Max rifled through all the drawers in the kitchen looking for anything that might point her in the right direction, but she didn’t find anything. Her mom or Neil must have moved it.

Just to her luck, there was the sound of a key scraping in the lock on the front door, and in came her mom, laden with a bag of takeout.

“Hi, Maxie,” said Ms. Mayfield. “Can you call your brother down for dinner?”

Max didn’t even argue with her this time, just called for Billy up the stairs and then turned back to her mom in the entryway.

“Did you say we had a paper that told us the owners of this house?” She asked.

Ms. Mayfield looked surprised. “Yes, it’s with the rest of the sale documents. Why?”

At that moment Neil chose to walk in with a box that carried a lamp for the living room, so Max stopped.

“I just have a project for one of my classes already, I’ll tell you about it at dinner,” she said quickly. “Neil, do you need some help?”

After they’d eaten, Max’s mom went upstairs to her bedroom where the documents were kept.

“Here we are,” said Ms. Mayfield as she came back into the hallway. She held out a blue file folder to Max.

Opening it, she saw that it held photocopies of several documents.

"Thanks, Mom," she replied distractedly, walking into her own room. Hopefully something in there would prove to her whether or not she'd had a hallucination.

Max spread the copies out on her desk, looking for one that had a list of names. At last, she came across a paper that said "Chain of Title" across the top with a list of names and dates under it. The first thing she noticed was that the copy showed the original had sustained extensive water damage, but her finger followed the date column until she found 1860-1864, then across to where it said that the owner was a Karen Wheeler. The last name checked out, but... The name under it was Michael.

Max sat down in her chair. Karen must have been the "missus" El referred to; the mother Mike didn't seem to get along with very well, and he must have inherited the property after she... died? The name before her was Edward, and it was indicated that he was deceased in 1860, but it wasn't indicated that Karen was deceased in 1864. So maybe it was just that her son had come of age and the ownership of the property had passed to him. It must've been willed by the father (Edward?) while Mike was underage and so gone to his mother for a time.

Unfortunately, the rest of the document was illegible. Max couldn't tell what year the property had passed from Mike to someone else. It could've been in the same year it had gone to him, for all she knew, or maybe he'd lived to be a hundred years old and it only changed hands in the 40s.

Either way, this was proof that he'd existed, meaning Max couldn't have imagined where she'd been. She hadn't known the names of anyone who'd lived in this house before her family. So what was the deal with the root cellar? Was it some kind of time machine? Had someone built one and buried it in the ground? She doubted she'd ever have answers.

The next morning at school, she was thinking about what to do when she saw Lucas in the hall. She should tell him! He might think she was making it up, but he might also believe her, and maybe he would help her investigate. She ran ahead to catch up to him.

“Lucas!”

He turned around. “Oh, hey, Max.”

“Can we talk at lunch?” She asked. “Something happened.”

Lucas looked concerned. “Are you okay?”

Max nodded quickly. “I’m fine, but I need to talk to someone. Can you meet me on the bleachers?”

“Sure,” he agreed slowly, narrowing his eyes. “Is this about what you asked me yesterday?”

The warning bell rang, announcing one minute to class. “We don’t have time right now, but yes,” she replied. “Sort of.”

Max started backwards, heading in the direction of the gym.

“Sort of?” Called Lucas, raising his arms in confusion.

“I’ll explain!”

She spent the whole of PE distracted by thoughts of how she would explain what happened to her the day before. She had come up with no way for any of it to make sense other than to explain it concisely, and Lucas gave her no opportunity to gather her thoughts because he was already sitting on the bleachers when she got there.

“Hey,” he greeted.

“Hey,” Max replied as she sat. “So this is gonna sound really crazy, but...”

And she explained it all as best she could, starting from the first vision of the house and the apparition in the yard all the way to coming back out of the root cellar to find no time had passed.

Lucas looked more and more skeptical as Max went on. By the end of it, he sat with his arms crossed and his eyebrows raised.

“So you want me to believe that you somehow went back in time?”

He said. "Do you realize how crazy that sounds?"

Max huffed. "I *know* it sounds insane," she retorted. "But here, my mom had this and she showed me it after I asked."

She handed him the chain of title.

"It's damaged and you can't read all of it, but it was enough for me to know they were real," she said as he scrutinized the paper in his hands.

Lucas didn't say anything for a few moments as he examined the document, but finally:

"This is pretty solid evidence," he admitted. "If you hadn't seen it before then you wouldn't have known the name to imagine it if you hallucinated, or something."

"Exactly!"

"But," he added, "I think we should do more research. Maybe we can find more records about your house."

"Where should we start?"

Lucas had suggested they might go to the library or even town hall to take a look, but he couldn't go until the next week. His grandparents were visiting, so his mom wanted him home.

Max didn't mind waiting all that much; what she really wanted was to try and figure out if she could make it work again. She had been scared the first time, but she figured it was because it was all so unexpected. Now that she really considered all that had happened, it didn't seem so bad. She got the impression she'd be good friends with the pair she met if only she had time to actually know them. In any case, it was better than having to deal with Billy, who hadn't yet managed to land a job and was becoming increasingly bad-tempered.

That very afternoon, she went out into the yard and contemplated the cellar doors. How had it worked last time? Could she just throw open the doors and go inside? She doubted it worked that way but she

figured she should try anyway.

When that didn't work, Max stood outside again and decided maybe she needed to think hard about where she wanted to go, so she thought hard about exactly how she'd seen the house and the people she'd met and kept all of that in the forefront of her mind as she went back in and closed the doors. This time she stayed in the dark for a bit longer, hoping she would feel something shift.

She didn't, and when she climbed the stairs out everything was still the same. She pushed the doors closed again.

"Why aren't you working?!" She yelled.

Max kicked one of the doors in frustration and immediately regretted it, her toes stinging as she pivoted on the spot and walked back to the house.

She decided to do some homework instead and try the cellar again later.

When Billy got home though, he started mowing the grass instead of coming inside, and Max didn't want him to see her. She knew it would look weird and she wouldn't be able to explain herself in a way that didn't make her sound crazy, so she stayed in her room. Her thoughts spun.

Out of the blue, as if the thought was sent to her, she remembered that on moving day she'd seen a trapdoor in the ceiling of the upstairs hallway, right by her room. Attics were always places where people kept secrets, weren't they? Who knew what she might find up there, and while Billy was still occupied with the yard Max wasn't going to venture outside again.

She dragged her chair out into the hall with her and looked up; there it was, a square in the ceiling with a little hook on it to pull open. When she opened the door, she felt a weight seem to drop down with it, so she hopped off her chair and let the door go. A ladder unfolded on top of the chair.

Max hadn't thought about how she'd have gotten into the attic after

opening it, but clearly whoever had made it had thought ahead of her. She moved her chair out of the way and looked up into the dark hole in the ceiling, and for a moment she thought she saw the swish of a skirt disappearing into it at the top. Could it have been-?

She climbed up and found herself at the top of the house. It was incredibly dusty, seeming like no one had been there in a long time. There was one window facing the side, letting in a dirty stream of light, and the room was empty. So much for secrets, then. Max sat down by the window and hugged her knees to her chest, letting the weak sunlight warm her a little.

Again, she was reminded of Dustin. He would have been having the time of his life trying to solve whatever mystery there was in this house. He had such a naturally curious personality; this type of thing would have been right up his alley. That sudden burning pain of grief came to her, choking and suffocating her in its grip. Why did he have to go?

She wasn't ready for him to be gone. He'd had so many dreams, so many things to live for... all things he would never get to experience. Things he would never see himself accomplish. Only because she'd convinced him to go for a drive with her. If she'd never...

Max squeezed her eyes shut tighter, trying not to let tears escape, but she couldn't control the choked sob that came out. It wasn't fair. She needed her best friend with her, not this empty gaping hole in her life where he used to be. They were supposed to go out into the world and become adults together. It wasn't supposed to be Max on her own. She didn't think she could do it alone.

She hit the wall with the side of her fist in anger, and to her surprise a section of the baseboard popped out a little bit. Curious, Max wiped her face and pried it further open to peek into the space. There was something glinting back there. Sticking her hand in, she grasped something cold and metal, suspecting that it was a key. When she brought it out into the light, she saw that it was. How strange. Why was there a key hidden in the baseboard in the attic?

She blew on it and wiped it on her shorts to get rid of some of the dust and cobwebs. It was a pretty standard looking key, by *antique*

standards. Max wondered what it might open. Maybe there was something up here that she hadn't noticed before, so she got up and walked around. Her second round of the attic didn't reveal anything obvious, but now that she knew there was a secret baseboard space, maybe there was another trapdoor in the floor that nobody knew about.

After shuffling between all four walls twice, hoping to reveal something, Max sat down by the window again and did a visual sweep. And there it was.

She didn't know how she hadn't seen it before, but there was another little hook sticking out of the floor near the back corner, just like the one in the attic door she'd come through. Max made her way over and tried to pull it up. It wouldn't budge at first, nothing like the main door, but with enough force Max was able to get this new trapdoor open.

Under it was a set of very narrow stairs that led straight into darkness and Max cursed, wishing she'd thought of a flashlight. Standing still for a second, she waited to hear the lawn mower, and when she did she went straight for the ladder back down to the second floor. Billy was still busy, which bought her some time.

Luckily, a flashlight was still on top of her dresser from the other night when she'd used it to inspect the yard, so she was back in the attic in a minute. When she shone the light down into the hole in the floor, she saw that the stairs didn't go very far, seemingly ending somewhere on the level below her.

Cautiously, Max descended the stairs. Why were old stairs always so small? She felt as though she were in danger of breaking her neck with every step. Soon her light hit the floor at the bottom, and Max saw that she was in a room. It was narrow, but she guessed it was about the same length as her bedroom. On the left side there was a section of wall that extended further inward, like the backside of an alcove. In the opposite corner stood a wooden chest. Could the key be for that?

Other than the chest the room was empty, similarly to the attic. The left wall was interesting though, so Max walked over to inspect it. It

must be the backside of another room. What was underneath this section of the attic? Could it be her closet? She shone the light around and saw the outline of a doorway positioned in the narrow end of the wall. She pushed against it and was surprised to find that it gave a little.

“Come on,” she whispered. “You can open.”

She pushed against it again but it seemed to be stuck on something on the other side. Max did have boxes inside her closet after all. If this was what she thought it was, the door was already open enough for her to see it from the other side, so she left it alone. Going back to the chest, she pulled out the key.

The key only fit into the lock after a bit of finagling, but Max figured it probably wouldn't have fit at all if it wasn't the right one. As she opened it, Max was hit with a smell she could only describe as *old* : musty and dusty; the smell of something that hadn't been opened in a long time. Inside the chest she found a stack of handkerchiefs, slightly yellowed by age but not as much as could be expected. Some were embroidered with E I and the rest with E W. Could they have belonged to the girl she'd met, El? Possibly, but Max didn't know her surname. Beside those lay an embroidery hoop, which was only recognizable because Max had seen her grandmother using one often when she was little.

That was all, and Max was a little disappointed she hadn't found anything more interesting in the chest. At least there was the secret room. It could prove useful if she ever needed to hide something. She did wonder why the builders of the house had made it, though. Sighing as she went back up to the attic, she realized she was more disappointed to not have found anything that pointed her in the direction of answers. She still had no clue what the deal was with the root cellar, or how it worked. And she wanted to make it work. There had to have been a reason she was the only one seeing things, and there had to have been a reason that she was transported through time.

Back in her room, with the attic door closed and everything restored to the usual, Max opened her closet and confirmed that the other door she'd found did lead into it. A section of the wall in the back

was open, butted up against the stack of boxes full of items Max hadn't had time to look through yet. She pushed it closed, deciding not to go back in, and found that it moved both ways. *Useful*, she thought.

When she turned around and got out of the closet, her room was transformed. The girl she'd met the day before- El- was making the bed. A bed that was decidedly not Max's.

"What the-" She spluttered. "El? How did I get here?"

She didn't reply, and Max stood there stunned until the bedroom door opened and someone else came in- the boy, Mike. He seemed to say something to El and she seemed to hear it, but Max didn't hear anything come out of their mouths. The two of them walked out and Max followed, but when she got to the hall there was no one there. They'd disappeared into thin air. She did a double take when she saw that her room was completely hers again. It looked as though she'd just had another vision.

What the hell was going on?

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

hey yall so i wrote this like immediately after i posted the last chap but i wanted to wait a little so i could have time to write the next one!! chap 6 is not done yet tho :(HOWEVER, it is started and this week is pretty much my busiest week of the semester so once the next few days are through i should have more time!!

also i have a midterm in 40 minutes so OOF wish me luck

happy reading!!

A week and a half after the initial incident, Max still hadn't managed to find a way through the cellar. She'd tried everything she could think of: waiting until sunset, running out when Billy antagonized her again, sitting inside for longer and longer amounts of time in the hopes that something would *happen*. She'd already had the thought countless times that had Dustin been there, he would've figured it out already. He was good at puzzles and had an incredible memory. There had to be *something* that hadn't occurred to her yet.

Also disappointingly, she and Lucas hadn't found much conclusive at the library or town hall.

("Is that everything?")

"That's everything I could find, Max."

"Should we ask the clerk?")

The clerk at town hall had told them that a lot of paperwork had been lost in a fire that destroyed the south wing in 1909. So much for that avenue of research, then. The library kept records for the schools, but nothing as far back as the 1850s was in an easily accessible place. The librarian had said they could come back in a

few days and see if she'd found anything.

So there she was... unable to do anything. Max had exhausted all the options she could think of, and so the afternoon found her sitting on the front porch, tightening the wheels on her skateboard. She'd felt them a bit looser when she was on her way home from school earlier. Lucas hadn't come home with her as he'd gone to the library to work on a group project for another class, but he'd said he'd come by if the librarian *had* managed to find anything for them.

She was taking a liking to him, and she thought he might be, too. He'd invited her to sit with his friends at lunch almost immediately after meeting her, but she hadn't worked up the courage to do it yet. She wasn't sure why, but maybe she just wasn't ready for new friends. However much she liked him, though, she was a little afraid of what Billy's and Neil's reactions to seeing Lucas might be if they were home when he came over. She didn't think they knew that their neighbours were a black family.

Billy had at least found a job at the rec centre on Main, but it wouldn't start for a few days and he was home all the time until then. Luckily it meant his mood was hugely improved, but still. Hopefully he wouldn't do something stupid if Lucas paid them a visit.

Lucas showing up that same afternoon was a double-edged sword. Billy was inside, right in the living room which made the front porch a highly accessible view, but it also meant that something had been found at the library, which might give them clues. Max saw him coming up the path through the trees holding something, and as he drew closer she thought it looked like a plate.

"Hey," he said as he stopped in front of her. "My mom sends cookies to our new neighbours."

"She didn't have to," Max replied, setting her skateboard down to take the plate. "But thanks. They smell good."

She smiled at him. Lucas smiled back, and neither of them said anything for a moment until Max put the plate down as well.

"So what did she find? I'm assuming that's what you're really here

for,” she said.

Lucas shuffled awkwardly, reaching into his back pocket to pull out a piece of paper. “She almost didn’t let me have a photocopy, but this is what there was. I think that’s your guy.”

He was pointing at a name near the bottom of a list of students enrolled at the single schoolhouse that had existed in 1853, and there was that Michael Wheeler again. Max snatched the paper from him for a closer look. 1853 was ten years before the day she’d arrived, which would make the Mike she’d met a child at the time. It seemed right.

“Was there anything else?” She asked.

Lucas shook his head. “Not much,” he responded. “I only copied this page but there were a few more and it looked like he was only in school until 1860.”

Max’s mind was going a mile a minute trying to connect the dots. The previous owner of the property before Karen Wheeler had been an Edward who’d died in 1860, and what had Mike told her? He’d only been in school “until times were hard enough” for him to be needed at home. It all made sense.

“It makes sense, Lucas,” she said quickly. “With what I found in the house documents and what I- what he told me. It has to be real.”

Lucas nodded. “I don’t think you’re crazy, Max. I just don’t know how it’s possible.”

She stood up. “Do you want to see it?”

Lucas shrugged and Max started walking towards the back of the house. She thought she might have seen the front window curtain flutter for a moment, but she wasn’t sure. The root cellar looked as unimpressive as ever and she felt a little unimpressive herself as she showed it to Lucas. He lifted the doors and looked in for a moment, but then let them drop shut again.

“I don’t know what else we can do,” he said. “Maybe it was a weird one-time thing.”

Max didn't say anything, but Lucas then brought up something else. "Didn't you say there was a girl too?"

She could have smacked herself. How had she forgotten El? Just because the property had belonged to the Wheelers didn't mean there wouldn't be anything with El's name on it somewhere.

"You're right!" She exclaimed. "They went to school together, maybe she's here too." Max looked at the paper again, but unfortunately she didn't know El's surname so she had to go by the first names and that wasn't how the list was organized. She did find it though, near the top sat the name Eleanora Ives.

"Holy shit, dude," she said. Something else had occurred to her.

"What?" Asked Lucas, moving closer to her to look at the paper himself.

Max pointed at the name. "She's here, that's her. And you know what? Last week I found this old chest thing in a secret room and all it had in it was hankies."

"So?"

"So, the initials on some of them were E I! That could've been her!"

Lucas looked skeptical again. "Some of them?"

Max huffed, exasperated. "The rest had E W but maybe they weren't hers."

"Why would there be hankies from two different people, that's so random."

She crossed her arms. "Do I look like I know why any of this is happening? There could be a million reasons!"

They both looked at the list again, their eyes drawn to the curly ends of the W...

"Or maybe," said Lucas, "W for Wheeler?"

Max considered it. "Maybe she married him. I did think they were acting a little careful around each other. And he pretty much admitted to having feelings."

"Do you think the church would know?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. But until we know more..."

Lucas seemed to agree. "I should get going too," he sighed. "Let me know if anything else happens?"

"I will. That's a promise."

He smiled again, and it warmed Max from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. A tingling feeling blossomed in her chest and she smiled in return.

"See you," he replied, and then turned and walked back the way he came.

Once she couldn't see him anymore, Max sat down by the root cellar and stared at it. What was she not remembering about the day she'd gone through? There had to be something. It couldn't have been a one-time thing, she could feel it. She lay back and tried to imagine everything exactly as it had been.

Annoyingly, the sun was glaring directly into her face, so she moved into the shade of the bushes and short trees around the doors. The shade... shadows! She sat up abruptly. Of course! There had been a shadow cast by one of the trees that split the doors exactly in half. Looking over, Max was irritated to find she'd have to wait to test this new theory. The doors were still mostly in the sunlight, as it wasn't late enough in the day yet for the shadows to be long. Frustrated, she went back to the front of the house to continue fixing her board and maybe taste some of Mrs. Sinclair's cookies while she waited.

Max had sat restlessly, getting up every quarter hour to go check the doors, and had eventually moved to sit at the back to keep an eye on them. She didn't want to miss the moment after all this stress over it. In the end she did almost miss it, distracted as she was by a rabbit

she'd seen hopping along the treeline, but caught it just in time. This time, Max threw open the doors and descended with confidence. This was going to work. It had to.

Just like all the times she'd tried and failed in the week before, she didn't feel anything change. She was going defeatedly towards the stairs, having mentally declared this her final attempt, but then she felt a wooden step instead of a dirt one. She paused and dug her foot in harder to check, but nothing gave. It was solid wood! She'd done it!

Excitedly, Max raced up the steps and emerged into the light of dusk, although the temperature was now much lower than where she came from and shockingly, there was snow on the ground. There wasn't anyone around, it looked like. There were no clothes on the line like last time, and the house was dark.

She shivered in the cold and didn't even realize for a second that the darkness of the house didn't mean anything here. *Of course it's dark*, she thought. *Electricity's not a thing yet*. So actually, there could very well be people around and she just couldn't see them. A moment later, she heard voices carrying over the wind, coming from behind her.

Down by the creek were two figures, arguing, and by their voices Max was able to guess that they were actually Mike and El. She'd spent all that time trying to find them again and now she'd stumbled into an argument, so she hid behind a bush to listen. She wasn't going to leave just yet.

"You don't need to do this," came El's voice. "If they wanted you they would have called for you already."

Mike threw his arms up. "Don't you think I know? I can't let him go by himself. He was my only friend for a long time, it would feel wrong to let him go to war alone."

"And what about me? I don't mean anything to you?"

Max peeked out briefly and saw that they both looked like they'd been crying, and that they'd been outside for a while already. Both of

their noses and cheeks were chapped red with the cold.

Mike reached out for El's hands and pulled her closer. Max felt like she was intruding on something very private, but at the same time she had a feeling she should stay and see what happened.

"You know that isn't true," he said. "You mean *everything* to me. You have to know that."

El wrenched herself out of his grip and turned away. "Then don't go," she responded. "Stay here. We need you here. *I* need you here."

"El..."

"Don't do that. Don't say my name like that."

"What else do you want me to say?!" He exclaimed. Max was getting colder by the minute. They'd better hurry up or she was going to have to give herself away.

"You know why I have to do this! Will isn't- he won't handle it well on his own, he's too soft. And my father-"

El turned back around suddenly, her features twisted angrily. "Your father died four years ago! Why does anything he ever said to you still matter?"

Mike's face went stony, and for a second Max thought he'd seen her, but then he spoke again. "I can't stand around and be useless anymore, El. Fighting this war...it'll end soon and I'll have been part of the reason it's over. We can't live like this forever."

El only shook her head, her hand pressed to her mouth.

"Listen to me," he said, taking her hands again. "I'm going to come back. I promise you I'll come back. No reb is going to stop me. All I need to go on is knowing that you're safe. If you're still here I have something to come back to, you understand?"

El didn't respond, but Mike seemed to take that as his answer. "Eleanora Ives, I swear to you that when I come back you will have a man worthy of being your husband. A million times over what I am

now.”

“I would take you now,” she replied. “I would have done the same yesterday. And I will tomorrow and all the days after.”

It was quite sweetly heartbreaking, but Max would’ve appreciated the emotion more if she wasn’t freezing her ass off. Luckily, Mike stepped away, as if he was going to cross the creek, but then he stopped and looked at El again. Suddenly the pair surged toward each other and Max looked away, feeling like she’d already intruded enough. A few seconds later, Mike’s voice came again.

“I love you.”

“Write to me.”

“I will,” he promised, and then jumped over the creek and disappeared into the woods. Max watched as El stood there alone, and decided she’d better take the chance and go home. She wasn’t sure what to do with what she’d just seen and didn’t think El would appreciate the suddenness of her arrival.

Strangely, the root cellar was warm, in stark contrast to what was outside. Then Max popped out in *her* backyard again, her skateboard sitting where she’d left it next to the plate of cookies from Lucas’ mom.

Right. She’d promised to tell Lucas if anything happened, but she didn’t want to tell him about this. It seemed too private. She sort of felt like she shouldn’t have been there either, but at the same time like she was meant to be. Like it was important that she be.

Either way, she was still freezing. She needed to go shower and warm up.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

hey everybody!! i'm back to updating this bad boy lmao

sorry for the literal longest wait ever, school kind of murdered me a little bit and the semester only just ended!! also didn't get much feedback last chapter and it made me kinda sad but there were some people who really liked this and wanted it continued so this is for those people!!!! i love you with all my heart thank you for leaving me nice comments <3

anyway. I've been trying to write this for like two months and we FINALLY got it my guys so here it is!!!!

there is also a scene where max fights with billy so i will be putting a line of these ***** where it starts and ends so that whoever wants/needs to skip that knows what to avoid :)

Max was standing in the forest on the edge of a road. Behind her was the smoking wreckage of her mom's car. Her head throbbed and her vision was blurry. Everything was dark, but she knew Dustin was around somewhere. This dream was the same every damn time.

Except... she couldn't find him.

"Dustin?" She called. "Where are you?" She wasn't expecting an answer, and she didn't get one, not really. She just *felt* something. Like she needed to go further into the trees.

So she went. It felt like endless darkness, cold and foggy and completely inescapable. There was no way out except forward; to wherever this tug was pulling her. She wandered for what seemed like hours, until she came across a field of flowers. It was much lighter here, not quite day but not the dark oppressiveness of the

forest either. The flowers all looked like daffodils, their golden bells standing out in the tall grasses around them. Where was this?

“Max,” came a voice. A voice she would not ever forget. Could not forget.

Max turned and there was Dustin, sitting down among the flowers looking completely unharmed and strangely at peace. She stood rooted in place.

“Come here, dude,” he said, acting completely normal. As if this was a regular occurrence. As if she’d seen him not five minutes before. As if he hadn’t been *dead* for the past year.

“Dustin?”

He gave her a look. “Uh yeah, do I look like someone else to you?”

God, the sarcasm. It was all there. It was as if he’d never left.

“Where am I?” She asked.

He shrugged. “Somewhere. I’m not really sure. I don’t have the answers to everything, you know.”

Max sat down in front of him, close enough to see and hear but not close enough to touch. She was afraid he might disappear if she tried to make this real. “But you’re- you’re dead.”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said casually. “I’m still around sometimes, you just can’t see me. But I’ve checked up on everyone.”

“So what you’re saying is, you’re a ghost?”

Dustin snorted. “No, I’m not a ghost. I’m just able to exist in small pieces in the people who remember me. I know what you’ve been through,” he said quietly.

Max didn’t reply. She didn’t know what to say to him if this was really real, but this was just a dream, wasn’t it? It couldn’t be Dustin really here talking to her, but she felt strangely calm.

“Max, you need to forgive yourself,” he continued. “You know it wasn’t your fault that deer came out. You did what you had to do. Shit happens.”

“I wouldn’t say shit happens when it’s life and death.”

“Well, shit happened, didn’t it? You can’t be like this your whole life, and I know it’s only been a year and it’s hard but you have to let people in. That Lucas guy is cool.”

Max looked up at him again. “You think so?”

“Yeah,” said Dustin. “I’d be friends with him if I could. And the other two you met, too.”

“You know about that?”

He rolled his eyes, and it was such a Dustin move that Max almost laughed. “I told you I’ve checked up on you. And you know what you have to do,” he added.

“What, go back?”

Dustin looked at her and didn’t say anything, but his message was clear.

“You think I need to go back there and fix whatever that was that I saw? What, he isn’t going to come back to her if I don’t go there? Dustin, that’s changing history! What if he isn’t *meant* to come back and I ruin everything?” She exclaimed.

“You already changed history the first time you went. You know it, Max. Just as much as you know that I would never have blamed you for what happened to me,” he said. “You have to leave me behind. I’m part of your past now, not your future. If you can’t let me go, you’re never going to be able to move forward. And the only way through is forward.”

Dustin’s voice seemed to be fading a little, even though he still looked solid. Max could feel herself waking up. She was becoming conscious of her bedsheets against her skin.

"I think I'm waking up," she said.

"You are," he replied. "Just think about what I told you." He got up and started to move away.

"Hey, wait!" Called Max. "Is this real? Or am I dreaming?"

Dustin smiled at her, and suddenly bright light broke through the sky above the field. "People and places are always much more connected to their pasts than they ever think they are."

Max sat up in her bed with a gasp, heart racing. Her room was mostly dark, but sunrise was coming over the horizon. Had she died and been resurrected? Whatever the hell was going on since she moved into this house was one freaky thing after another.

She rose from bed with shaky legs and looked out the window. There was nothing of note except a weird fog over the fields in the distance. The house felt cold and silent.

Max padded down to the kitchen, rubbing her arms over the thin fabric of her pajamas. It was Saturday and it was way too early for anyone else to be awake, but she knew she wasn't going back to sleep. Not after that dream. Had it been a dream?

She reached into a cupboard for a bowl and then poured herself some cereal and milk and sat at the table in the gloom of early morning. It only made sense for it to have been a dream, but at the same time it had felt so real. Max had felt like it was really Dustin there speaking to her, and with all the other strange occurrences lately, maybe the idea that it really *had* been him wasn't so farfetched.

As she ate her breakfast, Max decided that even if he was just a figment of her imagination, she agreed with what he'd said. She *was* going to go back and try to fix what she'd seen. The root cellar had seemed to call to her since the day she'd moved in, and she had to be seeing those apparitions for a reason. Something needed to be changed. She needed to talk to Eleanora Ives. Maybe dream-Dustin was right and she would be able to find closure, somehow.

Either way, Max wasn't going to show up in the past in sleepwear.

Her pajamas weren't much different from the clothes she usually wore, but those clothes had caused a stir the last time she'd been seen and she wanted to appear less conspicuous in case she came across someone she hadn't met yet. It was more than likely since the only person that would probably be there that already knew her would be El. Her mind made up, Max crept back up the stairs as quietly as she could and started to rifle through her closet.

She didn't have almost any dresses and the ones she did were definitely too short, but Max unearthed an old pair of overalls she suspected her grandmother had made for her and that she had never worn. They were made of a light blue cotton and the straps closed with buttons instead of buckles. She figured they would probably make her look enough like she belonged on a farm to be passable at first glance. She threw them on over a button-up she had hanging on her chair and went back downstairs to find an old pair of laced boots she knew she had lying around somewhere. She remembered putting them in the downstairs closet when she'd unpacked most of her clothes.

Determinedly, Max went outside, grabbing a jacket just in case it was winter again in the past. She knew the cellar only worked when the doors were split in half by shadows, but she had figured out which tree it was that cast the shadow and it was directly between the cellar doors. Therefore, it should cast a shadow splitting the doors twice a day, on opposite sides. She could only hope which side wouldn't matter. As she approached it, she could see the rising sun starting to lengthen the shade around the root cellar and decided to take a walk around the house while she waited for it to hit the right spot.

As she walked, she rubbed her arms to fight off the chill. September hadn't gotten super cold yet, but it was nearing October and it was early morning. There was still dew on the grass, wetting the hems of Max's overalls as she watched the morning fog burn away in the coming sunlight. She wondered if she should wait until the afternoon and go talk to Lucas before she did anything, but then decided *really*, she had been the one to discover this situation and it wasn't like she needed anybody else's permission to do what she wanted. Lucas could wait.

Eventually the shadows were close enough that Max stopped in front

of the doors in anticipation, waiting for the right moment. As soon as it hit she opened the doors and dropped a foot in, then looked back at the house. Still no visible movement. A breeze stirred her hair and she descended the rest of the way, closing the doors over her head and encasing herself in darkness. She stood for a few minutes, straining to hear anything.

Suddenly, there was a loud thumping noise outside, as if someone had dropped something nearby, and Max felt a surge of excitement. Had it worked?

“Miss Holly, please!” Called an exasperated voice, and Max recognized it immediately as El’s. It *had* worked! But now there was the question: who was Miss Holly? Clearly someone else was outside, so Max decided to stay in the cellar and hope no one needed to enter it.

“Your mother is waiting for you!” Came El’s voice again.

“I don’t want to go!” Answered another girl. She sounded younger. “I hate getting fitted!”

El’s voice faded as if she was walking further away. “You’ve outgrown your nicest dress and you’ll be needing one if you want to go...”

Max went up the steps quickly, straining to hear anything else from the top without actually going outside and revealing herself. She was probably going to startle El anyway, as time had clearly not passed in the same way for her as it had for Max. Max could hear indistinct voices and then what sounded like it might have been a horse, followed by a strange rumbling noise. A wagon maybe? Were they going to town? Her plans would be shot if El was leaving for the day.

A few excruciatingly long moments of silence later, during which all Max could hear was her own laboured breathing as she tried her hardest to stay quiet, she heard footsteps in the grass again and a short grunt as whoever it was picked something up. Was it El? It had seemed like it was her who dropped something earlier. She waited a little longer, giving the person time to walk away, before she eased one door open and peeked out.

It was sunny again, and definitely not winter this time. Down by the side of the house, Max saw the now familiar long skirts swishing back and forth as El bent over a basket of clothes, getting ready to hang them on the line. Her hair was up now instead of in the braid Max had seen her with before. Relief filled her. Hopefully the other residents of the house had gotten far enough that she wouldn't be exposing herself to new people.

Max went the rest of the way up the wooden steps, closing the cellar door behind her and treading cautiously over to the clothesline. She was nervous. Would El remember her?

She swallowed down a lump in her throat and forced herself to speak. "El?"

The other girl whipped around suddenly, holding an arm protectively across her body. Her eyes widened as they landed on Max.

"Max!" She exclaimed. "You're back?!"

Max shrugged awkwardly. "Yeah..."

"What happened?" El asked, throwing the shirt she'd been holding back into the basket. "I never saw you after you went to town with Mike that day. He told me you disappeared."

Max hesitated. "Did he really believe I was from the future?"

El frowned and moved away from the basket, her skirt fluttering around her ankles as she moved to sit in the shade by the wall. Max followed, unsure what to expect. El clasped her hands in her lap.

"He said he wasn't sure how it was possible but that he didn't think you were a liar," she answered. "Is that where you went? Home?"

Max nodded. "I kept trying to come back but it took me so long to figure out how. It was nearly two weeks before I got it."

"Two weeks!" Cried the other girl. "It's been two years since I last saw you!"

Max started in surprise. She knew it had been some time, obviously,

but two *years* ? “So you’re nineteen now?”

“Nearly,” El replied. “My birthday isn’t until the beginning of May.”

Maybe the advance in age explained the difference Max found in El’s face. She couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was, but she thought the other girl looked different, somehow.

She cleared her throat. “I was here another time,” she said quietly. “You didn’t see me.”

El looked at her curiously. “When?”

“I’m not sure, honestly,” she responded. “It was winter, and I heard you and Mike arguing. Then he left.”

El’s face fell immediately and Max regretted bringing it up. This was clearly a sore topic, and it had been a private conversation. “That was January,” she said. “He’s a soldier now.”

“Have you heard from him?” Max asked gingerly.

El’s hands tightened almost imperceptibly. “He wrote me *once* ,” she said darkly.

Max furrowed her brows. “Only once? Wow.” So much for his declaration of love, then.

El looked angry for a moment, but then Max watched as her expression crumpled. “I don’t know what’s happened, Max,” she said in a pleading tone. “The war’s already over and I don’t know where he is. I don’t know *anything* .”

Max’s heart hurt for her, and even though she barely knew El she reached out to her as the other girl started to cry. It could not be easy to imagine that the person she most cared about (Boyfriend? Beau? Was he her fiancé or something?) might be dead. Max could relate. Dustin had never filled any sort of romantic position in her life as Mike clearly did for El, but he was her most trusted person and one she could not have ever imagined losing until she did. She knew what it was like.

She let El unload her emotions before speaking, rubbing her back the whole time. “We don’t know that’s something’s happened to him,” she assured. “The post isn’t good even in 1987, I would think it’s even more shitty right now. We can go find him.”

El removed herself from Max’s arms slowly, lifting her apron to wipe her face with it. “Do you think we’d manage it?” She sniffed.

Max shrugged. “It’s not like he went to Africa or something. He’s still on the same soil as us. We can find him.”

El sniffed again. “How?”

A plan was already taking shape in Max’s head. This was what she was meant to come here for, she just knew it. “We can go to the city and look for information on where he might’ve gone after enlisting,” she suggested. She felt a strange sense of déjà vu and almost heard Lucas’ voice whispering in her mind. She sounded exactly like he had when he’d taken charge of the direction of their investigation.

“I can’t leave right now,” El protested, sitting up fully. “The missus will be upset if I up and disappear while she’s gone.”

“Of course,” Max reassured her. “I’ll go home and get some stuff and then come back, and you can get yourself ready here.”

El furrowed her brows. “How do we stop the time from passing? It was two years since last I saw you for me, but only two weeks for you.”

Max was stumped. El had a point. “I don’t know.”

They sat in silence as they thought. “Maybe...” Started El. She frowned, unsure.

“What?” Asked Max.

“What if we traded something with each other? Something important?” El suggested.

Max nodded slowly. “You think if each of us has something that doesn’t belong to our time, it’ll keep us in sync?”

El nodded her agreement as she lifted herself off the ground. "I'll get something from inside."

She hurried off in the direction of the kitchen door and Max followed but remained on the porch. What did she have to exchange? The only thing she could think of was her watch, which she wasn't sure she wanted to let go of.

It was a child's watch, baby pink with a Minnie Mouse backing, and she'd received it as a joke. Dustin had given it to her on her fourteenth birthday, and it was one of the few things she had to remember him by. But if this would work...

El returned a few moments later holding a small brown object. When she handed it over, Max saw that it was a little cow carved out of wood. "My father carved this for me when I was a child," she said carefully. "It's how I remember him."

With that admission, Max decided she could entrust El with her watch. El took it slowly, examining it in confusion.

"It's a small clock," Max offered. "My best friend gave it to me."

"What is that... creature?"

Even in such a somber moment, El looked so confused at the sight of Minnie Mouse that Max had to smile. "She's a mouse."

"Did the person who made this ever see a mouse?!"

Max shrugged. "Maybe not. Anyway," she said, diverting the conversation back to their plan, "I'm gonna go, and I'll be back when the sun sets. What do you think we'll need?"

El thought it over. "Blankets, if you have them," she said finally. "It's alright during the day, but nights are still cold this time of year. And some food or water if you can spare it. I don't have too much money to be spending."

Max nodded and was turning away to make her way back to the root cellar when El grabbed her arm.

“Are you sure about this?” She asked.

Max looked at her. El looked nervous, but determined. “I came here for a reason,” she answered. “I need to be here. I have to help you.”

El released her arm and stepped back. “I’ll bring some clothes for you. Don’t leave the cellar until I come, I don’t want the missus to see you.”

Max agreed and El let her go down to the cellar, watching from the back porch until Max was out of sight.

Max gathered some blankets and grabbed as much food as she thought she could get away with without anyone noticing, packing all of it into an old carpet bag her mom had stored in the hall closet. Then she took it outside and left it in the cellar, finally settling on the back porch steps with a book she was supposed to be reading for her English class. She was going to go see Lucas, but it would have to wait until later.

When her mom saw her sitting outside reading she looked pleased, and Max faked a smile in her direction. She was retaining absolutely *none* of what she was reading. Billy, on the other hand, was passive aggressive with her all morning and Max wasn’t sure why. Neil was in a strangely good mood, so that couldn’t be why Billy was mad. She chose to ignore him.

Late in the afternoon, Max walked back into the kitchen from where she’d been lying in the yard trying to read after lunch, grabbing Mrs. Sinclair’s cookie plate with a word to her mom about going to return it. She decided to walk through the wooded area that separated the two houses, enjoying the dappled sunlight that streamed through the trees. It reminded her of older times, when there weren’t so many cars and tall buildings all over the place, when people were more connected to nature. There were definitely benefits to the twentieth century, but now that she’d visited the nineteenth, she knew it wasn’t all ugly and backwards either. To be honest, the town she lived in hadn’t changed *all* that much in the last 120 years, so she didn’t feel as scared about going back as she might have. And she wouldn’t be alone.

Coming back out of the trees into the warm sun, Max could see the Sinclair house in the distance. It was more towards the front of the lot than her house was, so she still had a bit to walk before she got there.

There was no one outside but the front of the house looked inviting and homey. Someone had put up hanging flowers all around the top of the porch, and there were more on the railings. They'd die soon, but for the moment they made Max smile. She rang the doorbell and stood back.

The door opened to reveal a young girl, about twelve or thirteen, who looked at Max as if she were an alien. "Who're *you* ?"

Max faltered. "Uh, I'm your new neighbour? Your brother brought some cookies from your mom by yesterday and I came to return the plate."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Lucas! Your girlfriend's here!" She screamed into the house. Max didn't hear a response and didn't know what to say to that either. "He's coming," said the girl snarkily. "I'm Erica."

Max reached out with her free hand to shake Erica's. "I'm Max. It's nice to meet you."

Erica smirked. "I know. He talks about you *all* the time, that's why my mom made cookies. We didn't know we were getting neighbours."

"Oh, uh-" Max stuttered again, but just at that moment Lucas arrived at the door, saving her from having to reply.

"Go away, Erica," he said shortly, glaring at his sister before smiling at Max. Erica walked away with another roll of her eyes and a sigh. "Sorry about her."

Max smiled back. "It's okay, she's funny."

He leaned against the doorframe and raised his eyes to the ceiling for a second in exasperation. "Not if you live with her, she isn't."

Max cleared her throat. "Anyway, I... came to bring back your plate,"

she said, holding it out.

Lucas took it and looked away for a moment before meeting her gaze again. “Was that... everything?” He asked, and there was something in his tone that she couldn’t place.

“No, there’s something else I wanted to talk to you about,” she answered in a rush. “But not here.”

Lucas’ eyes widened. “Okay, let me go give this back to my mom. I’ll be back in a second.”

He returned moments later and joined Max outside, shutting the door behind him before walking off the porch. Once they were further out into the yard, a good distance away from the house, he turned to her.

“Alright, so what is it?”

Max took a deep breath before starting. “I went back yesterday. And again this morning.”

“Like, *back* back? You saw them again?” Lucas asked. He sounded shocked.

She nodded. “It has to do with a shadow. I don’t know why, but that’s how it works.”

Lucas nodded slowly. “Kinda weird, but also kinda cool.”

Max didn’t say anything for a moment, wondering how to tell him her plan without him thinking she was crazy. Then again, he hadn’t thought she was crazy the first time. “Yesterday, it was winter and I saw them fighting. Then he left her.”

“I thought they got married?”

“We don’t *know* that. It’s definitely a coincidence, but those hankies could’ve belonged to anyone, Lucas,” she replied. “Then this morning I had a really weird dream and I decided I needed to go back and talk to the girl. When I went back it wasn’t winter anymore, and apparently the guy’s been MIA for months.”

Lucas crossed his arms as they walked, looking pensive. "This is all so weird."

"You're saying that," Max grumbled, and then grinned when Lucas lightly shoved her, smiling. Tucking her hands into her pockets, she continued. "Anyway, I said I would help her find him. I'm going back again tonight."

At that, Lucas stopped walking. "You're going back to *help her* ? So like, for more than a few hours?"

"Yes."

"Are you actually insane?" He asked. "A few hours is one thing, but you'll be gone for *weeks* ! You'll be considered missing!"

"No, I won't!" Max defended. "I told you, whenever I go the time isn't affected at all here. I don't know why but... it'll be fine."

Lucas looked unconvinced. "I don't think this is a good idea."

"I packed some blankets and water and food, and she'll have more," Max insisted. "We'll be fine. He's either dead or alive, it can't take that long to find one person."

Lucas shook his head. "You're crazy," he said. "Promise you'll be safe."

"You're not gonna stop me?"

He simply stared at her, and Max suddenly had the feeling that she'd known Lucas for a lot longer than she actually had. "Nothing I say will change your mind. Just be safe."

"Thank you," she breathed, jumping forward to hug him. "For believing me."

Lucas stepped back and squeezed her arm, giving her a single nod, before turning back to his house. Max went into the trees.

When she got home, the house was strangely silent. Her mom and Neil must have gone out. For that matter, maybe Billy did too and

she wouldn't have to avoid anyone when she went into the cellar later. The moment she landed on the second floor, however, the door to Billy's room flew open, banging against the wall.

"Where have you been?" He asked quietly. His eyes were crazed, and there was a dangerous edge to his voice.

Max took a step back, towards the door to their parents' room. "I went to give a plate back to the neighbours."

Billy clapped his hands, a demented smile forming on his face. "Are you sure about that?" He asked, taking a menacing step forward.

"Why do you care?" She returned. Billy was always weird and aggressive for no reason, but he'd never actually freaked her out like he was now.

He laughed. "Oh, Max," he said loftily, as if he knew something she didn't, "You think you can hide from *me*?"

He kept walking forward and Max kept stepping backward, running into the door of the bedroom behind her. She had no escape.

"I think you've been hanging around with that *boy*," he continued. "Who is he? Your little boyfriend?"

"What?"

"You think I didn't see?!" He roared. He was so close Max could feel his breath on her face. "That kid who came over yesterday, talking to you in the yard like he owns the place!"

"I don't know him!" Max yelled back. "He's the neighbour, and he's just some kid from my class, Billy, leave me alone!"

Billy slammed his hands against the door on either side of her head, trapping her. "You think you can lie to me? We don't associate with *those people*!"

Max was scared, but she wouldn't let Billy see that if it was the last

thing she did. She glared at him. "What do you mean, those people?"

"I don't want to see you speaking to him ever again, you hear me?" He threatened.

"Or what?" Max retorted. "Since when can you tell me what to do?"

Billy slammed his hands on the door again. "Listen to me, Max," he said dangerously. "If I see you talking to him again, you'll *both* regret it."

He started to back away, but Max wasn't done making her opinion known. Billy wasn't going to get away with talking to her like this. "You're just jealous I can make friends and live my life while your sorry ass still has to mooch off your dad! Aren't you twenty one? Why do you still live here if you hate us all so much? Fucking leave, then!"

At that, Billy flew into a rage, grabbing Max by the arms and throwing her forcefully into the door. Her head smacked hard against it, blurring her vision for a second, but that didn't impede Billy from snarling in her ear.

"You don't *fucking* talk to me like that, *Maxine* !" He yelled. "Or do you want him to end up like your other dead little friend? Huh? Is that what you want?!"

"Stop it!" She screamed, and then doubled over when he punched her in the stomach.

"Shut up, you stupid bitch," he spat, punching her again and sending her to her knees.

Max was reeling. Billy had never behaved this way toward her before and she didn't know what to do. He was bigger than her, hitting back wouldn't hurt him.

He started to back away again, but Max, seeing an opportunity, grabbed his ankle and pulled hard, sending Billy crashing to the floor. He hit the stair railings and howled in anger.

Max scrambled to her feet, her head pounding and the muscles of her

abdomen still aching where she'd been punched, lunging for a vase that stood on the credenza near the stairs.

"You little *whore* !" Billy screamed, starting to get up, and it was now or never. He might actually kill her, or something. Max lobbed the vase at his head, watching as it shattered over him and he dropped back to the floor. She stalked over to him and kicked him in the groin to make sure he'd *stay* down. She didn't regret it one bit.

"You leave me and my friends alone, do you understand?" She hissed.

Billy groaned and Max pressed the toe of her boot into his nose. "Say you understand!"

He groaned out a slow "I understand," and Max quickly moved away from him, headed towards the stairs. She nearly flew down them in her escape, jumping off the last two and sprinting out the back door. It wasn't quite sunset yet, but it would be soon. She'd hide in the bushes and hope Billy wouldn't find her.

A few minutes later, Max heard music coming faintly from the house. Billy must have gotten up and gone back into his room. He had to be blasting it for her to hear it all the way by the cellar. It made her feel less tense. If he was in there, he wasn't likely to come out soon; it would've been much more ominous if the silence had continued.

Still, Max stayed hidden just in case, keeping an eye on the cellar doors for her moment. It arrived before long and she tumbled out of the bushes in her haste to get inside. The familiar smell of the dirt walls and floor greeted her, raising her spirits. She would soon be somewhere where Billy could never get to her.

As usual, she didn't feel anything that indicated her travel, but she remembered El's warning to stay in the cellar until she came. Max had said she would return at sundown, so El had to be by soon.

Max waited down there in the dark for what felt like forever, growing more and more worried that the cellar hadn't worked its magic for

whatever reason. Maybe she could only make one visit per day and she'd already used it up that morning. After all, she still wasn't entirely sure how or why it all worked. But then, out of nowhere as Max hadn't heard footsteps approaching, the doors opened above her. The silhouette of another woman appeared to her, and then El's face peered through the gloom.

"Come on," she said, offering a hand. "We don't have all night."

Notes for the Chapter:

please let me know what you thought and come hit me up on tumblr @urdearestmom or on instagram @secret.fanacc !! love y'all and happy rest of your week <3

7. Chapter 7

Summary for the Chapter:

The search begins.

Notes for the Chapter:

whaddup everybody this is a pretty quick update since it's been less than a month since the last one LMAO

this is where we start getting into the REAL adventure and realize what's really at stake here so suffice it to say i'm very excited to finally really dive into the world of 1860s america

that being said, i'm also not american so forgive me if something is wrong lol. the civil war and antebellum era have long been an interest of mine but i'm not an expert :P

The train ride was uneventful. The walk to town had been as well, the two girls walking as quickly as they could to catch as much of the waning daylight as possible. Max had exchanged her overalls for the set of clothes El had provided her with. From what she remembered learning about the era, she'd been expecting a big skirt and having to wear a corset, but El only gave her underclothes and a dress printed with tiny flowers, and then a bonnet for her head.

"Hoops are for ladies who don't have a farm to run," El had explained when Max asked. "The missus keeps one for special occasions. And I don't have a corset that would fit you, so your... *bra* will have to do."

The dress was quite nice, if a little long as El was taller than her, but Max was comfortable and she was glad that she could blend in. No one had looked twice at them on the train ride. The man at the ticket counter had seemed a squick mystified as to why two young ladies were buying tickets for the night train to the city unaccompanied, but

he didn't stop them either.

On the ride over, El explained her plan. She knew a friend of the Wheeler family that had moved to the city a few years prior who would let them stay with her. El had visited the inn she ran with Mike after the move, as one of the sons had been his best friend. From there they could ask around about soldiers returning home.

Unfortunately, by the time they arrived in Indianapolis, it was the dead of night. It would be too dark and dangerous for the two of them to walk to their destination alone, so they decided to wait out the night at the station. At least inside the building there was some form of security. The girls picked a corner in view of both the ticket stand and the doors and El lay down to get some sleep while Max kept watch for them.

While El slept, Max looked around and thought about the situation. It was absolutely *insane*. How had she let herself come all the way here, to Indianapolis of 120 years past? She felt so far removed from her life, as if this was a fairytale or she was watching a movie. Union Station wasn't even a train station anymore in 1987! But it was all real; her hands on the dusty ground and her head against the hard wall told her so. Strangely, she didn't feel out of place. She felt that same sense of peace she'd felt in her dream about Dustin in the field, as if she was meant to be where she was.

She turned her thoughts to where they would be headed in the morning. She wasn't sure where soldiers would have enlisted, but she vaguely remembered something about camps in the city- had one of them been a prisoner of war camp? Max thought there was something to do with Fountain Square as well, because she'd lived near there and could recall learning about something to do with that. How she wished she'd paid more attention in history class... if only Dustin was here, or even Lucas. They'd know. Either way, she felt reasonably confident that she'd be able to navigate, even if this was the 1860s.

They switched places throughout the night, and when the morning sun rose El roused Max and the two of them made for the doors. The moment Max stepped outside into the light of dawn, the reality hit her again. *Nothing* was familiar. She'd forgotten that horrible,

nauseous, twisting feeling she'd had the very first time she'd visited the past and realized she didn't recognize her town. The street outside was packed dirt and there were horse carriages lining up down the block, ready to ferry passengers to and from the trains. This was a street from another time; El's time, Mike's, and their family's. Not hers. This wasn't the Indianapolis she knew.

Max stood still on the steps, feeling dizzy and like everything around her was muffled. This wasn't supposed to be like this. She was supposed to know what to do, where to go. The city was her *turf*.

"Max?" Came El's voice. "Max, we've got to go. Are you alright?"

Max swallowed around the lump in her throat as she let the older girl take her arm and lead her down the steps. She couldn't let on to El how scared she was, not when this whole thing had been *her* idea. El would still be safe at home on the farm if not for her.

As they walked, neither girl spoke. El was leading the way to their destination and Max simply took in their surroundings, trying to tamp down her nausea. The feeling of being in a dream had completely disappeared. Why she had expected to see familiar, twentieth-century city streets, she didn't know, but she had. Maybe it was because so far everything had been either vaguely familiar or just somewhere she'd never seen the way it was now, like Union Station. She felt cold and lost, and only El's arm looped through hers kept her grounded. She only started to feel better when El stopped in front of a welcoming-looking building and announced their arrival.

Byers Inn, read the sign, and Max followed El through the door into a dusty entryway, dappled with sunlight. There was a desk with a bell on it, but no one was around. El reached for the bell and rang it quickly, stepping back as someone stumbled through another doorway. The person was a slight woman, thin and not any taller than Max herself, with her hair falling out of the bun it was supposed to be in.

"Mrs. Byers!" Greeted El, smiling.

Mrs. Byers blinked, looking between the two girls, and then seemed to recognize El. "Oh, Eleanora! It's been so long since I've seen you,

dear. How are you?" She said, reaching out to pull El into a hug.

"I'm alright, all things considered," sighed El. Her voice sounded strained, and Max knew instantly it was a lie. Not just because the entire reason that they were here was that El was very much not alright; Max could tell that there was a lot on her mind. "This is my friend Max," she added, moving back.

Mrs. Byers smiled warmly at her. "It's wonderful to meet you," she said, proffering her hand to shake.

"You as well," Max returned, shaking the woman's hand.

Mrs. Byers looked between them again before clapping her hands. "Why don't you girls come into the kitchen? Did you come on the night train? You must be hungry." She kept talking as she led them down a hall toward the back of the building, turning left at the end to enter the kitchen.

"This is my son, Jonathan," Mrs. Byers introduced the man sitting at the table. He was leaning over a plate of scrambled eggs, scooping them up one handed. His other arm was wrapped in bandages. El had mentioned on the way over that he was only a few years older than them, but he looked much older than that. His face was tired and haggard, and from his arm Max could guess that he'd been a soldier sent home due to injury. He nodded at them in greeting, turning back to his eggs as they sat at the table. Mrs. Byers slid two more plates of eggs in front of them, each accompanied by a thick slice of bread.

Everyone ate in silence for a few minutes until Mrs. Byers frowned at the ceiling. "Where's Nancy?" She asked, turning to Jonathan, who was getting up to deposit his plate on the counter.

He shrugged. "She said she was tired. Might be down soon, but I'll go check." He left the room near silently, his footsteps quickly disappearing up the stairs.

"I suppose you're here to visit her?" Mrs. Byers asked the girls, turning back to them. "I would have thought Karen would come herself, being her mother."

El quickly shook her head, and Max realized she had missed something. She didn't even know who Nancy was, but evidently Mike had another sister. Either El had forgotten to mention her or Max had zoned out when she did.

"We're not here for Nancy," supplied El, tearing a chunk off of her bread. "Although I'd love to see her," she added brightly. "The babe will come soon, won't it?" El's voice sounded tight.

Mrs. Byers nodded. "Soon, yes. She's near always sleeping, tired as she is. Poor thing."

The three of them sat in silence for a moment longer before Max decided to speak. "We're looking for her brother, actually. El's worried because he hasn't come home or sent word yet."

"Have you heard from Will at all?" Asked El.

Mrs. Byers' face twisted anxiously. "No," she said quietly. "He never wrote much."

"Well, that's why we're here," Max continued, avoiding looking at the older woman and pushing her eggs around the plate. El was still tearing her bread to pieces. "We want to look for them."

Mrs. Byers didn't say anything for a moment, but then got up and started to slice the rest of the loaf of bread that was lying on the counter. "You girls should go home," she said, facing the wall. "You might be able to get some information at the camp, but I'd rather you send word to the boys and then be on your way."

Max met El's eyes from across the table, and they silently came to the agreement that their final decision would depend on what information they were able to find.

"Where might the camp be?" Questioned El.

Mrs. Byers was giving them directions to a place called Camp Sullivan near the centre of the city when Jonathan reentered the kitchen, awkwardly giving one-armed support to the heavily pregnant young woman Max guessed was Nancy. He'd hardly helped her settle onto the bench when El was already up and hugging her.

Giving them space, Max left the table and got Mrs. Byers to repeat her instructions so she could write them down. Upon realizing what the plan was, Jonathan immediately volunteered himself.

“I’ll go up and speak with them,” he said. “More likely as they’ll help me than you.”

“You will do no such thing,” said his mother, exactly as Nancy said “Absolutely *not* !”

They all turned to look at her. She was glaring at Jonathan as she spoke. “You are injured and you need to rest. *Especially* when our child is this near coming.”

Jonathan scowled. “My brother is at stake here-”

Mrs. Byers covered her eyes with a hand before turning back to the counter to ladle the soup she’d taken off the fire a few minutes earlier into bowls.

“So is mine,” retorted Nancy. “El and Max can handle visiting the camp to ask questions, Jonathan, they aren’t going into battle. You’re staying here.”

Jonathan didn’t look pleased but he didn’t argue any further, and El and Max’s plans were set. Mrs. Byers told them to take their bags to the attic and started setting the bowls out, urging them to get going before all the guests started coming down for breakfast and crowding the kitchen. As they left, Nancy stopped them for a word.

“You’ll find him,” she said to El, who only nodded. “And thank you for helping,” she added to Max, giving both girls’ hands a squeeze before turning back to her breakfast with a sour expression.

They had nearly a half hour’s walk ahead of them, as the camp was even further west of Union Station where they’d departed that morning. From the directions Mrs. Byers had given, Max had deduced that the place they were going was Military Park in her time. She’d been there before, and it made her feel a little more confident, but she didn’t let her expectations rise. After all, it was currently a military camp, not the public park she knew it as.

El was quiet most of the way, only speaking when they ran across intersections and when Max asked her a question.

“Nancy knows?”

El looked at her curiously. “Nancy knows what?”

Max shrugged, wishing her dress had pockets she could hide her hands in. “The way she said, ‘you’ll find him’ made it sound like she knows about... whatever’s between you and Mike.”

The brunette sighed. “Nancy has always known,” she said, motioning for Max to step into the street after her as they crossed it. “She used to tell me that all he ever did was talk about me, before I started working for them. She teased us from the day I started until the day she married Jonathan and moved away.”

Max didn’t say anything, waiting for El to continue. A smile was growing on the other girl’s face, making Max smile too.

“We were only twelve at the time,” she continued, before shaking her head. “Well, I was twelve. He was thirteen.”

“What a big difference,” remarked Max dryly.

El let out a short laugh. “You’re right. We were both children. I always felt something for him, and I thought he felt for me too, but I never said as much until we were older. After we met you, in fact.”

“I remember,” said Max. “I thought there was something going on with you two, and then when I went to town with him I asked him if you guys were together and he said you weren’t. But *then* he went and bought you a bonnet ribbon,” she finished, teasing.

El reached up to her chin and tugged on the ribbon tied underneath it. “It’s this one,” she said softly. “I’ve not changed it since he left.”

Just like that, the mood was sombre again, as if clouds had rolled in overhead when in fact the sun was shining.

“You really miss him, don’t you?”

El nodded, and Max thought she looked ready to cry. “I love him, Max,” she confessed. “More than anyone else in this world. I don’t know what I’ll do if he’s-”

“Hey, no,” Max interrupted, steering them away from *that* possibility. “We’re not going into this assuming the worst, okay?”

El nodded again, and Max took her hand as a gesture of comfort. They didn’t say much else until arriving at the camp. At the gate stood a man in the blue uniform of the Union, who stood to attention when they approached.

“Ladies,” he greeted, removing his hat for a moment in deference. He put it back on as he continued. “How may I be of service?”

El seemed unable to speak for the moment, so Max took over. “We’re looking to find out whether our cousin is returning home soon, sir,” she lied. It’d likely be easier to get information if they said they were family. “We haven’t heard from him in some time.”

The man frowned. “Which regiment was he in?”

Max looked to El for help, but she only shook her head. “He enlisted in the city, but I don’t remember, sir.”

He seemed to hesitate for a moment before turning to open the gate behind him. “I’ll get you to speak with our commandin’ officer. He’ll have the enlisted names, and such.”

He led them through the grounds, motioning for them to wait outside of a building that stood towards the back end of the camp. As they waited, Max looked around. There were few men remaining, but those who were there all looked incredibly drawn and tired, just as Jonathan did. Max had never seen the toll of war with her own eyes before. She knew people who had, of course, Lucas had told her his father was a Vietnam veteran, and she knew Neil was as well. But it was completely different to see it herself. The Civil War had been the bloodiest war ever fought on American soil, and it was obvious all these men still inside the camp resented being here. They should have gone home.

The man from the gate returned with another man, the commanding officer he'd mentioned. "Good day, ladies," said the officer cordially, even though he looked like he'd rather be anywhere else. "How may I assist you?"

The first man returned to his post as Max explained their situation once again, and then the officer led them inside. "When did your cousin enlist, miss?" He asked, opening a drawer in a cabinet behind the lone desk that sat in the room.

Max looked to El again, unsure.

"January of this year, sir," supplied El. "He signed up with his friend, as well."

The man hummed, withdrawing a stack of paper from the drawer and sitting down in the chair at the desk. "Name?"

"Michael Wheeler, sir," El continued. "And the friend is William Byers. We're here on behalf of *his* mother as well."

Max started to feel antsy as they stood there watching the officer flip through the list of names. She really didn't want to consider the worst outcome, but what if-

"Ah, here," said the officer, pointing out a pair of names in the middle of a page. "Mustered in together in March, 144th infantry." He frowned. "Now, let me see..."

El suddenly gripped Max's hand tightly, and Max squeezed back in reassurance. At least they had *something* now. The officer was digging through a pile of correspondence Max could see on the desk.

"Those boys have come and gone," he said. "They're still in service for a while yet. But you'll have to give me a moment, I'll search the recent list for you."

It seemed as though the entire camp held its breath while the girls waited for the officer to finish his search, and when he looked up with a disappointed expression, his bright blue eyes downcast, Max felt like her stomach had fallen out.

"I'm afraid neither of those names is here, ladies," he told them.

El had paled and covered her mouth with her hand, looking as though she might vomit as she turned away from Max. The officer looked sympathetically at her.

"Are they- are they dead?" Asked Max tentatively.

The officer sighed. "Most likely," he said, and then flinched when El let out an ungodly noise and ran out the door. He sounded like he'd said the same thing a thousand times already. "There's no way to be sure besides going to Washington."

"What's in Washington?"

"Arlington," he answered, and Max remembered that name. It was the cemetery where a lot of casualties of the Civil War had been buried. "Or you can check the field hospitals, there's a lot of 'em. But you might have better luck searching for a grave."

"Thank you," Max said tightly, following El outside. Who said the boys were dead? If there was a possibility of them being alive, they were going to take it. How dare that officer be so hopeless after watching El nearly break down in front of him?

The brunette was leaning against the wall of the building, her face glistening with tears, and she sobbed as Max took her arm and led her back to the entrance.

"Max!" She cried. "I can't, I can't-"

"Let's go somewhere else," Max said, nodding to the man at the gate before taking El with her across the street. There was a grassy bank there, where she sat El down before sinking to her knees beside her.

"El, listen," she started, taking El's hands. Her heart hurt for her, knowing exactly what her pain felt like. It wasn't something she liked to revisit. "They might not be-"

"*Dead* , Max! He said most likely!" She wailed. "I can't go on without him, Max, *I can't!* "

Max frowned, unsure how to console her friend. She was never very good at addressing feelings. “El, you *can* . It’s not easy but you’d live.”

That was clearly the wrong thing to say as El only sobbed louder. “No!”

“El-”

“You don’t understand, Max,” she said tearfully. “I’m ruined! No man will ever take me as a wife now!”

Max couldn’t think of why not for a moment (*who wouldn’t want a girl as lovely as El for a wife?*) before it clicked. *Ruined*. Her eyes widened. “You guys slept together?”

A fresh round of sobs came out of El as she nodded, taking her hands out of Max’s to hide her face in shame. Max scooted closer to wrap her arms around El’s shaking shoulders.

“It’s *okay* ,” she assured. “You love each other, you don’t need to be ashamed of being together. And I don’t think we should give up hope.”

El didn’t respond, so Max continued talking. “The officer said there’s no way to know for sure unless we go to Washington, alright? We can go to Washington and look there. He said there’s a lot of field hospitals.”

A few minutes later, El had settled enough to speak again. “We can go to Washington?”

“Yeah,” said Max quickly. “In fact, let’s go check the train station right now and see what the fastest way is.”

With that reassurance, El allowed Max to hoist her back to her feet, and they started on their way to Union Station again.

“Not giving up,” said El, and Max shook her head.

“Not until we find them.” *Dead or alive*, she thought, *but not until we find them*.

Notes for the Chapter:

what do you think?????

so Camp Sullivan was actually a military camp in Indianapolis in what is today known as Military Park, but it took me FOREVER to find out about it bc the internet didn't want to cooperate with me. my search history probably looks weird af rn lmao. the 144th Indiana Infantry was also a real regiment that mustered in in March 1865 and out in August 1865, which is why the officer says they're still in service. however i have no idea whether they went back to Indianapolis at any point, that was creative license

i also wanted to have a whole bit about Max describing how it feels to wear the historical clothing she's in, but then i remembered she and El likely don't have the same measurements and El probably wouldn't have had more than one corset anyway. this would have been purely for my own satisfaction because i LOVE historical dress and corsets are not actually a deathtrap, but it didn't fit so :(

anyway, i hope you guys enjoyed this chapter and hopefully you'll be seeing the next one soon!!

8. Chapter 8

Summary for the Chapter:

To Pittsburgh!

Notes for the Chapter:

hello anyone who reads this!!!!!! i'm back 2 months later!!!!

the end of my summer school semester kind of kicked my ass a little and then i was working but i'm on vacation now so maybe i'll have more time/energy to be writing :D this also means my posting times might be even more random than before since i am currently vacationing in my lovely homeland in western europe :))

actual notes on chapter 8: this was supposed to contain a LOT more but i was getting tired of this and also of not posting an update and i thought where this ends was a good place to stop ;) it also means this fic will now be 12 chapters instead of 11!

happy reading and leave me your thoughts!!

The attendant at the ticket counter was not the same man as had been there still in the early morning. This one was gruff, with a thick moustache and dark, beady eyes, and he'd seemed reluctant to answer Max's questions. He'd given in eventually when she suggested he might run into trouble if he didn't help them (he wouldn't, but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him).

As it turned out, there was a ten o'clock train out of Union Station to Pittsburgh, where there would then be another train on its way to Washington. All they needed to do was get out to the station before ten, which was easier said than done with Mrs. Byers thrown into the equation.

They'd waited until after lunchtime, once all the dishes had been taken care of and the guests who'd come in for lunch had gone again, before bringing it up to her, hoping that she'd be receptive if she was on a full stomach and in a good mood.

"Absolutely not," she insisted. "I want you going straight home."

"But-"

Mrs. Byers crossed her arms, roughly dropping the bread dough she was kneading onto the counter. "I'm sorry but I can't let you go, girls."

El looked like she was about to cry again, and so did Mrs. Byers. Max stood between them awkwardly, trying to think of a way to diffuse the situation and convince the older woman that they would be fine. Maybe if they could get Jonathan- no, he wouldn't leave home to go so far when Nancy looked like she would pop any day.

"I know that- that it's difficult," Mrs. Byers continued, haltingly. "I miss my son dearly. But I won't let you two put yourselves in harm's way as well. Just another thing on my conscience."

"We wouldn't be going on some insane journey, Mrs. Byers," Max offered feebly. "It's just two trains and then we'll be there."

"I can't give up," added El softly. "Not if there's a chance."

Mrs. Byers sat heavily on the wooden bench at the table, putting her head in her hands. "I can't in good faith let you go."

The kitchen was engulfed in a thick silence, all three of them trying to think of what to say next. Was there a way out of this? El sniffled and Max watched her as she pitifully wiped her sleeve across her eyes.

"You'll go home on the morning train tomorrow," said Mrs. Byers finally. "I won't hear a word of anything else."

El abruptly walked out of the room, and Max heard her body thump against the wall outside. Mrs. Byers looked up at her. "I've got some laundry needing washing if you girls don't mind. Jonathan's outside

filling the water.”

Max nodded stoically in agreement before walking out the same door El had, finding her leaning on the wall staring brokenly at the ceiling. El’s bun was slowly coming apart, and Max could see her own braids splintering as well. It felt like a long time and no time at all had passed since they had hopefully departed the Wheelers’ farm. She reached out and gently grasped her friend by the arm, leading her to the staircase where El sat down, looking worn.

“We’ll make a plan,” Max assured her quietly, trying to avoid Mrs. Byers overhearing them. “We’re not giving up.”

El sniffed again, nodding. Her hands trembled in her lap. “Will you start the laundry? I want to speak with Nancy.”

Max nodded back, squeezing El’s arm in what she hoped was a reassuring way. “I’ll be outside.”

They parted ways, Max going outside to try and figure out the whole laundry situation armed with an apron from Mrs. Byers, as El turned and wandered up the stairs looking for Nancy. Jonathan had filled a large wooden tub with hot water he’d carted out from the kitchen earlier with the help of one of the more permanent inn visitors, and there was a basket full of soiled clothes and assorted rags sitting nearby. An item Max identified as a washboard leaned against the wall by the back door, a thick bar of lye soap sitting on the windowsill.

The whole setup intimidated her for a moment, never having had to use anything but a washing machine before, but she figured getting some soap into the water so the clothes could soak was a pretty good idea. The bar was solid as hell, not soft at all, making it hard for her to get a piece of it, but eventually (after some very strong language and violent smacks against the windowsill), Max was able to get a good chunk off.

The heat rising from the water kept her warm as she stood over the tub stirring with a stick so the soap would dissolve, even through the slight chill of the late April afternoon. Max wondered what El was talking to Nancy about, and whether El would tell her later. She liked

to think that El trusted her, but she couldn't help but feel that there was something off. It wasn't that Max thought she needed to know every single thing there was about the other girl, El was perfectly entitled to her privacy, but it was throwing her off.

Her arms were getting tired of stirring by the time Max decided the water looked soapy enough. Blowing the loose hair out of her face, she reached for some of the clothes from the basket and dropped them in. Where was El?

Max had dropped more clothes into the water and was stirring those around as well by the time El joined her in the yard, rolling her sleeves up.

"Time to start scrubbing?" She asked, gesturing to the washboard by the wall.

"I don't know," said Max. "I've never done laundry like this before. How long are you supposed to let the clothes soak before you scrub them?"

El furrowed her brows. "You don't do laundry?"

Max shook her head, stirring slower. Her arms were aching. "We have machines that do it for us. Only really delicate stuff gets hand washed."

El's eyes widened. "Machines!" She said incredulously. "You have machines that wash your clothes?"

Every time Max accidentally let something slip about future inventions, El always got super excited. It made Max feel a certain excitement as well, seeing such a hope for the future in El was contagious. It gave her fuel for their mission. "Yup," she reaffirmed. "Now how long does this need to soak?"

Their conversation devolved into good-natured talk as they worked their way through soaking, scrubbing, and wringing out the laundry before hanging it to dry, El telling Max stories about growing up in the country and funny things about Mike and his sisters on the farm. In return, Max spoke of Lucas (El smiling teasingly and not saying a

word as to why) and told her all about Dustin. It felt good to talk about him, to remember the type of person he'd been. How fun-loving and caring he was, and how he had that same idealization of the future that she saw in El, only imagining the positives to come, the discoveries to be made. She might have choked up a little bit, but El didn't mention it just as Max didn't mention the fact that El had joined her with a flushed face and red-rimmed eyes.

Before long it was getting dark, and Mrs. Byers called them in for a meal after the dinner guests had left. The dinner passed without incident, but a thick shroud of negativity surrounded them at the table. Max didn't know any of the others well besides El, but she could tell Nancy and Jonathan were both stretched thin with worry over their brothers in addition to everything else going on in their own lives. Mrs. Byers was a fountain of anxious energy, clearly wishing none of this had ever happened, and El was ripping her bread into small pieces to avoid looking like she wasn't eating. It was all stressing Max out, the idea of having to sneak away soon without detection hanging over her head. They'd have to make sure they didn't get caught, or Mrs. Byers wouldn't let them out of her sight until she personally made sure they were on the right train home.

After washing all the dishes and wishing everyone a solid night's rest, Max followed El up to the attic room where they had stashed their belongings that morning. The inn was silent as everyone settled in for bed, and it only made Max more nervous about getting out unseen. They wouldn't have to worry about triggering any alarms, at least, but Mrs. Byers didn't seem like the kind of woman who slept soundly.

El was washing her face with the water from the pitcher on the dresser by the time Max joined her, and Max threw herself directly onto one of the beds. It was a narrow cot with a lumpy mattress, but she supposed it was better than the floor of Union Station.

"How are we going to get out?" She whispered to El. "If Mrs. Byers catches us, we're screwed."

El didn't even pause with her routine, pulling her hair out of its bun to run her fingers through it. It was longer than Max expected, down to her waist in frizzy waves. El seemed to be angry as she finger combed it, roughly pushing her fingers through the strands.

“El?”

The brunette sat down abruptly, her cot creaking ominously as she did so.

“We have to try. We either get caught and go home, or we don’t,” she said. “I would rather have Joyce Byers angry at me than break a promise to Mike.”

Max sat up, thinking that Joyce seemed like a good name for Mrs. Byers. She looked like a Joyce. “You promised him something?”

El dropped her hands into her lap, her shoulders slumping. “We promised we wouldn’t lose each other,” she replied quietly. “I can’t go home without knowing if he’s still out there somewhere.”

Everything about El’s posture looked defeated, from her slumped shoulders to her downcast eyes to the way her fingers worked at the fabric of her skirt. They both knew the likelihood of the pair of boys they were searching for being unharmed was slim, but there was no way they had come this far already just to turn back.

“Okay,” said Max. She started pulling her hair out of its braids to redo them more tightly. “We wait until there’s absolutely *no* noise. It’s still early, so we have time.”

“And we didn’t unpack anything,” added El helpfully. “We just have to be very quiet.”

They waited ten minutes in silence, then twenty, then thirty, and after forty minutes Max was starting to get antsy. What was the tipoff supposed to be anyway? After what seemed like an eternity, El stood from her bed and blew out the candle they’d brought upstairs with them. In the moonlight from the window, Max saw her nod her head toward the door.

The two of them nudged it open slowly, cringing with every movement in fear of being heard. Fortunately for them, the landing was carpeted. The stairs were too, but the banister was horribly wobbly so they avoided it. In the darkness, El nearly lost her balance more than once and Max almost followed her in a tumble down the

staircase, but they managed to make it all the way to the back door before something went wrong. In her haste to get outside, Max accidentally knocked into the cooking pot sitting by the hearth with a clang, startling herself, El, and clearly someone upstairs too.

“Go!” El hissed at her, and Max lifted her skirts and ran down the side alley. El followed closely behind, and they were near to the end of the street before Max chanced a look back to see candlelight in the ground floor window of the inn. No one seemed to be following, but they kept running.

Both of them were out of breath another half block away, so they slowed to a walk until they could breathe. As soon as she was able, El started running again, Max keeping up. They needed to put as much distance between them and the inn as possible before they were discovered. Soon enough, the train station loomed ahead, no one chasing behind them, and Max felt herself calm down a bit. They hadn’t been found out, and all they needed to do now was buy tickets and get on the train to Pittsburgh.

The ticket counter attendant didn’t bat an eye at their purchase. With any luck, if anyone came around asking for them, he wouldn’t remember. The two girls settled onto the only train in the station, it being nearly ten in the evening, and waited for departure. Max breathed a sigh of relief and nearly laughed once all the doors were closed and the train’s whistle signalled that it was leaving. They’d gotten away with it!

“We did it,” she told El.

The other girl cheered. “To Pittsburgh!”

At the very last minute, just as the train was beginning to pull out, a man and woman came running into the station, bellowing to stop the train. Max’s blood ran cold when she recognized them: Jonathan and Mrs. Byers. El grabbed her arm and pushed her down, keeping them out of sight through the window, and the train continued on its way. As it clattered into the night, Max felt her heart racing, and the adrenaline of almost getting caught made her laugh breathlessly.

“Holy shit,” she said. “That was too close.”

El didn't respond to that, merely saying, "Now we're on our way."

The two of them took turns sleeping and keeping watch, just as they had the night they'd first arrived in Indianapolis, but Max started to get creeped out when she noticed, somewhere after leaving the city of Columbus, that there was a man across the aisle and a few rows up that kept turning around to look at them.

He had a thick head with a slab of trimmed blond hair on top of it, his face tinged slightly red. He was well-dressed and looked clean, but that didn't make him less intimidating. The only other person in their car was *another* man (which wasn't very comforting), and in any case he was asleep. The look on the first man's face was nothing short of calculating and it scared Max that there was absolutely nothing she could do about him. However, she decided to let El keep sleeping. Maybe the man was just being a creep and wouldn't actually do anything. El was tired and it wouldn't be worth it to wake her for no reason.

As they pulled into Pittsburgh in the early hours of the morning, earlier than the sun even, El had awoken and Max was still keeping an eye on the blond man as they got ready to exit the train. El was just getting out of her seat and stretching to reach their bags on the overhead rack when a deep voice spoke from behind them.

"Now, what are two young ladies doing travelling alone?"

Max felt her stomach swoop like the drop on a rollercoaster, her whole body going cold. She turned around to see the man from earlier. He was leering at them, his eyes glinting.

"We're off to meet our cousin," supplied El quickly. "He's waiting for us just outside the station."

Something in their faces must have given away the lie, though, because the man leaned closer. Max could smell his rancid breath from where she stood.

"I don't believe that," he said, looping a lock of El's hair that had come loose around a finger and tugging lightly on it. His other hand rested on her arm. "Why don't you come with me? A beauty like you

surely needs a man to take care of her.”

El had frozen at the man’s proximity, her free arm resting tensely against her middle, and Max had no idea what to do. She’d always heard stories from other women and girls she knew about strange and creepy men, but she’d never had this sort of experience herself. The man could likely overpower them both if he wanted to, and the only thing she could think of was to attract attention.

“Let go of her,” she said loudly. The other passenger had already left the car and no new ones were entering just yet, but Max prayed someone passing by would hear. “We don’t want to go anywhere with you.”

The man glared at her. “Not you,” he snarled, his eyes passing over her hair. “Devil spawn.”

Max was stunned for a second, never having heard that one before.

“This one, though,” he continued, tugging El closer by the arm, “this one will bear my children by the end of the year,” he said, laughing gleefully.

That seemed to spark something in El, and luckily Max saw it before the man did. El stomped on his foot, digging the heel of her boot into his toes, and he let her go with a howl.

“I’m married,” she retorted angrily, her eyes narrowed, and then spat at him. For good measure, Max aimed a kick straight at his crotch, sending him to the floor of the car, and then grabbed El’s hand and yanked her out of the train.

“Let’s go!”

They ran down the platform and then across the station, weaving in and out of groups of people, desperate to make it outside before the man caught sight of them. The ridiculously early hour made it nearly impossible to see still in the dark, but they hunkered down behind a wagon parked up the street.

Breathlessly, Max asked, “You’re not actually married and just *forgot* to tell me, right?”

El shook her head, struggling to catch her breath. “No.”

A few minutes later, sitting silently on the street, El continued. “I’m not married but I might as well be. I’ll never be devoted to another man.”

Max reached over and took El’s hand in comfort, and it was then as she looked around that something struck her with a sudden stroke of terror.

“El,” she said shakily. “We forgot our bags.”